THE MAN WHO COLLECTED MACHEN

AND OTHER WEIRD TALES

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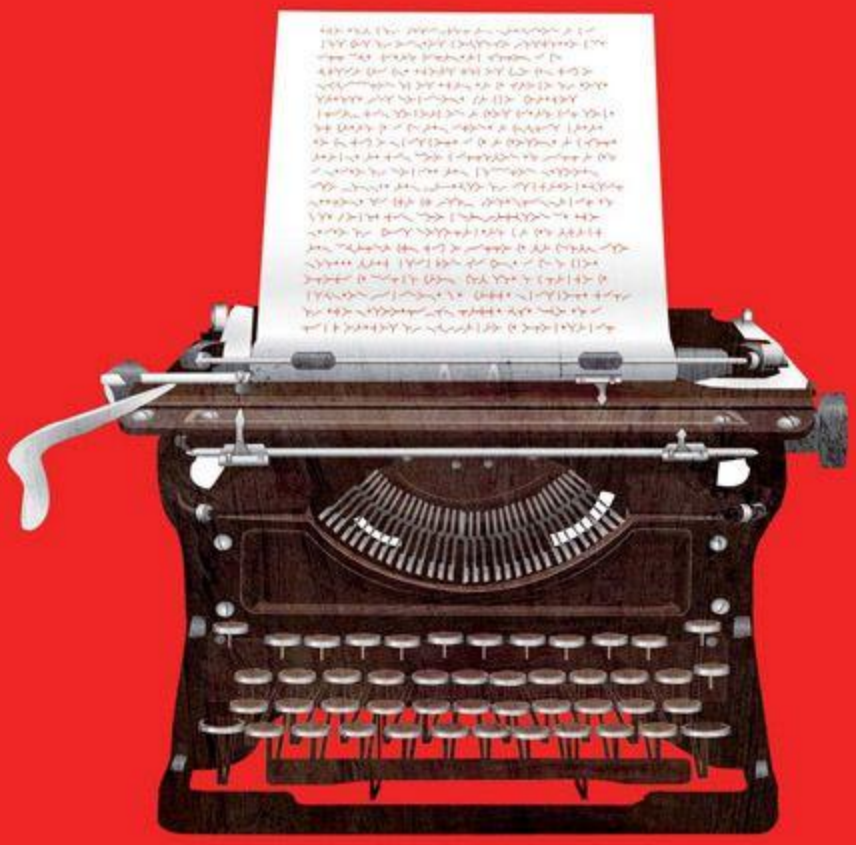

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Chômu Press

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by Mark Samuels

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedicated to my old friend Ray Russell:
"The Man Who Rescued Machen"

"*The Man Who Collected Machen & Other Stories* is possibly Samuels's finest collection to date. Like most writers who are confident of their own abilities Samuels is not afraid to acknowledge influences. Hints of Machen, Poe, Lovecraft, Borges and Ligotti are to be found in these stories, but the dominant figure is always Samuels. … What all these stories possess is a rich literary and intellectual subtext."

Reggie Oliver, *Wormwood*

"Mark Samuels, like Thomas Ligotti, looks beyond the supernatural into some dark void which lurks in our minds, he then proceeds to show us the really scary stuff that lurks in that darkness"

Highlander's Book Reviews

"The main thing that distinguishes Mr. Samuels' work from that of many other modern writers of the weird tale is how cerebral it is. … Mr. Samuels' work derives most of its potency from the core idea that is at the heart of most of his stories. … often stunning notions about the nature of time, the world of the dead, language, the universe, or any number of other things … Mr. Samuels is a genius and the value of his work has not yet been fully appreciated."

Speculative Fiction Junkie

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Publishing History

Losenef Express

The town of Strasgol is situated in a corner of Eastern Europe forgotten by all but nationalistic Poles and Ukrainians. Their governments have squabbled over this tiny piece of territory for decades. Since neither claim has received international recognition, and its aged, insular citizens have scarcely any interest in politics, it has been allowed to fall into a state of decay. Its cobbled streets are mossy. Its mixture of architectural styles, ranging from Neo-Classical to Art Deco, has been disfigured by the state of near dereliction into which its buildings have fallen. Windows are sooty, with cracked panes, and once-elegant balconies now rot on lichen-crusted facades. At night scarcely half of the streetlamps light up, due to a lack either of sufficient electrical power or their being kept in a state of proper repair. In daytime the sky is invariably leaden, and low thick clouds hang heavy just above Strasgol. The myriad bell towers and spires of the town disappear upwards into the mist as if only half-constructed.

What had brought Eddie Charles Knox to the town had been an incorrigible wanderlust and a desire to escape from his commitments by retreat into an alcoholic haze. He had been looking for an unknown quarter of the continent where Americans were absent; such was his desire to escape from every trace of their pernicious worldwide influence. His only means of communication with people in this part of the globe was via the foreign language phrasebooks he carried with him, and by hand signals. He wanted nothing more by way of interaction.

Like the buildings of Strasgol, Knox was derelict. Only forty-eight, he had managed to destroy his liver. With his mottled face, broken capillaries and beer gut, he had long since ceased to draw attention from the young women at whom he stared and over whom he dreamed and wove impossible romantic fantasies as he sat in the Zacharas Café nursing a glass and a bottle of Jack Daniel’s.

Being a true son of Tennessee, he had a thirst for Old No. 7 whiskey. And had done for the last thirty years.

Back in the USA, devotees of supernatural fiction in mass-market paperback called Eddie Knox the “Berserker of Horror”. His heavy bulk,

the flaming mane of red hair and beard, the mirror shades, had all added to the legend that had grown up around him. Only the incongruous Harris Tweed jacket with the worn elbows distorted the overall image. But he couldn't bring himself to do away with it. Each ink blot, each smear of lipstick, each booze or ingrained powder stain on the fabric, recalled a precious memory he did not care to forget. First drafts in longhand with his trusty Waterman, drinking alcoholic English editors under the table at conventions, educating groupie nymphs in seedy hotel rooms, the acrid tang of cocaine as it hit the sinuses and the back of the throat after being snorted in toilets on first class transatlantic flights and in stretch limos. Now those glories were of the past and had faded away like ripples, like echoes, like the dying of the light.

Eddie Knox chuckled to himself grimly. He took another swig of Jack Daniel's from his personal shot glass engraved with a Confederate flag and looked around the Zacharas Café. Black humour with your choice of poison, Fortunato? But of course, Knox replied to himself, emptying his glass and making a silent toast; "The South will Rise". Another toast— "to Edgar A. Poe". Not "Allan" and certainly *never* "Allen". America was an ignorant Yankee Military-Industrial Complex, and traditional southern gentlemen were not required. The bastards had got to Poe in the end. Banged him on the head in Baltimore. Damn the Freemasons!

Knox wished he could drown his sense of self-contempt. Sure, it was delightful to be here in the Zacharas Café, with its intimate booths for private intellectual conversation, with its rococo plaster ceiling, its air of 1920s European decadence, pre-war cabaret, and engraved windows of dazzling green glass. But it was dirty money that got him here. And he believed he wasn't even worthy of raising a fellow author's silent toast to the likes of Poe.

Knox felt like a fake. It wasn't his tales of horror that seemed cheap; sure, they were hard-to-find but when found were nevertheless rightly lauded for their authenticity. No, it was the endless novels he'd written detailing the pulp adventures of Mungo the Barbarian and the sexual shenanigans of Mother Superior Lucia Vulva that had paid the bills and that had given respectability to the bank account. Those were what felt like cheating. When he was talking with fellow professionals, he laughed off any other objective than making big bucks. He was only a working writer. Fuck the pretentious snobs amongst us. But when he was alone, the

compromise hit him hard. He wanted to be remembered as an artist. Nothing else really mattered in the end. There was no other form of survival after death. In the final analysis, all writers find out this hard truth. Whether or not they admit to it is a different matter.

Knox loved Europe. He adored its sense of history and slow decay. He wanted to be absorbed into its fabric and leave behind every single last trace of the obnoxiously optimistic and bogus “American Dream”. He’d lived and fulfilled that dream; and found it as nightmarish as an endlessly repeated TV advert for fast food, as a “you’re worth it” fixed smile with oh-so-perfect white teeth. And so he stopped dreaming, and crashed headlong into a sea of reality he couldn’t bear, but which suited him better. He preferred to drown quickly than die via a suicide stretched out across years.

He downed another dose of Jack Daniel’s from his shot glass and stared across the expanse of the Zacharas Café. It was sparsely occupied. There were one or two eastern European businessmen in sharp suits nursing beers, a couple arguing quietly in a corner, and, behind him, a fat man slouched back into a booth with his face lost in shadow. Knox had turned around once, pricked by the sensation of being watched, and, although he could not make out the man’s face clearly enough to tell, he had the distinct impression this person was staring fixedly at him. Maybe, Knox thought, he’s one of the natives who hates tourists just as much as I, another tourist, does. The way the lights were arranged in that part of the bar meant the fat man was visible only as a shadowy bulk, except for his gnarled powerful hands. These were resting on the table, in a pool of light cast by a shaded lamp. They were every inch as large and impressive as Knox’s own.

After a couple more shots, Knox’s agitation increased. He tried to resist the impulse to glance behind him, but it was impossible. Each time he had the impression the fat man was not only staring at him with a malicious contempt, but also with a sneer about his lips. There was no way he could be sure of this, for the shadow over the stranger’s face masked it, but he felt certain, on some primal, instinctive level, it was true. Finally, with enough booze in his gut to overcome any sense of restraint, and with his bill settled by the U.S. banknote he left behind, he stood up abruptly, spun round and made directly for the booth containing the fat man in order to confront him.

But the stranger was no longer seated there. The booth was empty.

Knox cast his gaze around and saw the fat man outside, through one of the café windows. He was making his way into the fog and the back of

his bulk was only visible for a moment before it was swallowed up entirely.

Knox decided to go after him. Had he been sober, the idea would have seemed ridiculous. Chase after someone in the fog, in a foreign city, for the offence of having apparently stared at you with contempt? But he was not sober. He was drunk. Moreover, he was drunk and he was sick of everything. And the stranger had become a symbol of that "everything" in his mind. Knox did not know what he would do when he confronted the fat man, but he didn't think the outcome would be pleasant. Back in Tennessee, Knox used to shoot snakes on his porch.

Outside, the air was cold, clammy and thick. The shock of it made Knox gasp for breath momentarily. For a second he thought of returning to the café and forgetting about the whole thing. But he pressed on instead, accompanied by the sound of his heels clattering across the slippery cobblestones. He could see only a short distance ahead, and the streetlamps burned like spectral pools of light in the gloom. Knox knew he could not have kept pace with a younger, slimmer, fitter man, and it was only the fact that his quarry was as overweight as Knox that made the chase a contest. He had no idea if the stranger even knew he was being followed along the series of narrow alleyways and claustrophobic courtyards, although from the circuitous route taken, it seemed likely.

The streets became a delirium of images, of skeletal trees, arched passageways and tendrils of fog.

Just as Knox had reached the point of breathless collapse and could not continue, he found that the stranger's stamina had also given out only moments before. He saw the fat man's bulk leant up against railings, hunched over and gasping for air. Knox summoned his last reserves of energy and hurled himself towards the fat man before he could land a first blow.

All the hatred, rage and disappointment he had ever felt in life seemed to well up inside him and demanded vengeance upon this individual. Knox could not even bring himself to say anything to the fat man, but found his hands fumbling madly towards the stranger's throat. The fog fortuitously closed in around them in order to hide Knox's crime. The blood seemed to boil in his veins, and he squeezed and squeezed the fat man's fleshly throat, choking him to death. Knox heard a voice, its accent indistinguishable, croak out the words *I waited for you*, or what sounded like them, before a gurgling sound and then final silence.

Impossible that he had not seen his tormentor's—*his victim's* face. But it was true. And Knox realised that, had the fog not closed in, he would have deliberately avoided looking at it, because he was unaccountably terrified of what he would see. He was grateful to have been spared the sight of the dead stranger's face at the end, since he had pulled out the jack-knife he always carried in his breast pocket, the one with the corkscrew at one end and the blade at the other, and slashed madly at the countenance of the corpse, tearing through flesh and scratching against the bone of the skull. He used the weapon to slice and hack until his hands were dripping, and the cuffs of his Harris Tweed jacket soaked with blood.

But the deed had not been carried out silently. The sounds of the struggle, and of his victim's cries, had been heard. Knox heard the noise of advancing footsteps racing across the cobblestones behind him. There was more than one person closing in. Knox was sure no-one could have seen him commit the murder, for the darkness and all-encompassing fog had been his ally, but he had to flee now and flee quickly.

A return to his hotel in order to collect his meagre luggage seemed out of the question, for haste was of the essence, and Knox resolved to make his way to Strasgol Station, which he recalled was close by. He would board the first available train; clean himself up immediately in one of the compartment toilets and travel as far away from the town as he was able. As he stumbled through the narrow alleyways that weaved between the mouldering buildings, he thought to check his wallet. He'd cashed some traveller's cheques yesterday, and had a sudden fear he might have lost it in the struggle with the fat man. Nothing was missing.

Knox heard no sound of pursuit and, after walking for some ten minutes, arrived at the ill-lit and rundown concourse of the train station. A few passengers milled around inside under grimy fluorescent strip lighting, but it was late at night, and, in order to hide the blood on his hands and on the cuffs of his jacket, he stuffed his hands deep into his pockets. The ticket office had closed, and a sign on the notice board indicated that payment should be made to the conductor on the train. Also pinned to the notice board was a timetable. The final service, at eleven fifty, was scheduled to depart in five minutes, and was the express to Losenef.

Knox kept his head down as he joined the other seven passengers who were making their way onto the platform. The train was already waiting for them. It consisted of six coaches painted with olive livery and a driving cab,

marked PKP SN-61. The passengers climbed aboard, hauling their luggage into the compartments, and Knox waited until the other seven travellers had chosen seats before he joined the service. He wanted to find a seat where he could not easily be seen by anyone else, at least until he had managed to clean himself up. The very last compartment of the rear coach was completely unoccupied and so Knox chose this one for his purposes, climbing inside only as the platform guard blew his whistle and the train actually began to move.

Once he was seated and the train picked up speed, leaving Strasgol Station behind, he removed his jacket with the bloodied cuffs and rolled up his shirtsleeves in order to conceal the blood that had soaked through. He folded his jacket so that its arms were hidden beneath folds, and nestled the garment under his arm. Then he left his compartment and looked along the narrow, rubbish-strewn corridor that ran along the length of the coach. It was deserted. At the end was the door to the toilet, and Knox was relieved to see, as he approached, that the indicator above the handle was green; it was unoccupied.

The inside was tiny and dirty. There was not even enough room to stretch one's arms out to their full extent. A light bulb had been screwed into a socket on the low ceiling and provided a urine yellow glare by way of illumination. The lid of the squat plastic toilet was down, and for this mercy Knox was grateful, for he could detect the lingering stench of unflushed excrement. Above the crack-webbed washbasin was a round mirror about six inches in diameter. Its surface was coated with a thin layer of silvery-white residue, making it appear to be filled with mist. Knox turned on the tap above the sink, put the bloodied cuffs of his jacket underneath the dribble of cold running water and rubbed them vigorously with a token sliver of hand soap. After a few minutes of work, the cuffs turned from crimson to pink. No further change seemed likely, and the soap had been used up, so Knox ceased his labours. He looked up from the sink into the recesses of the small mirror.

At first he saw his own haggard face staring back at him, the eyes haunted, but then the image lost focus, and it dissolved into something else. He discerned a smear of red and black, until at last the vision gained form, and Knox stared at the ravaged features of the man whose face he had obliterated with his knife. The mutilated reflection in the mirror gazed back at him with Knox's eyes. Its lipless grinning mouth breathed out a single

sentence in a gloating whisper; *I still await*. For one terrifying instant it even seemed to Knox that he had switched bodies with the revenant in the mirror and was looking out from it through a cloud of mist at his own face. He raised his hands and covered his eyes to block out the sight, and when he lowered them it had vanished. His hands were trembling and his nerves were shredded. He needed a drink to calm himself down. No, he needed much more than that; enough to blot out the night journey until morning came, and he was hundreds of miles away from Strasgol and the scene of the senseless murder he had committed.

He cupped water from the tap in his hands and splashed it across his forehead, his cheeks and his beard. He looked again in the mirror, and to his relief, saw only his own face and the background of the toilet, but nothing more.

He passed along the corridor to the next carriage and found the buffet cabin situated in a small section at the end. The metal shutter in front of the counter was down, and Knox knocked on it, hoping to draw the attention of a recalcitrant railway staff member. The possibility that the buffet was closed on this service was one he did not wish to entertain; such was the desire he had for the relief only alcohol could provide. There had been no initial response to his knocking and so Knox tried again, more forcefully this time, using his fist, until he felt someone tap him on the shoulder. Knox turned and saw the train conductor. This individual was muffled up against the cold and had wrapped a scarf high above his neck and just beneath his nose. He wore a tatty railway-issue greatcoat, with the collar turned up and it seemed, from its condition, the garment had seen many years of service. His dark green cap was pulled down low across his forehead, its brim resting on the top of thick-lensed and impenetrable eyeglasses.

“Ticket, sir?” the conductor said, his voice hollow and his English heavy with an Eastern European inflexion.

Knox rummaged in the pockets of his jacket, turning over loose scraps of paper, until he remembered he had no ticket and had intended to pay his fare on the train.

“I have no ticket,” Knox said, “can’t I buy one from you now?”

“More money. Two hundred zlotys,” he said.

“I see,” Knox replied, irked that the conductor had immediately marked him out as an American tourist, and was prepared to take financial

advantage accordingly. Still, Knox thought, perhaps the man could be useful.

“How much extra would it cost to get a bottle of something warming to drink from the buffet? How about a discount for U.S. dollars?” he asked, pulling out his wallet from the inner recesses of his tweed jacket with the pinkish cuffs.

“Buffet is closed. No buffet. No drink. Unless you pay maybe,” the conductor said, as his head nodded towards the notes Knox had drawn out and held in his hand.

The conductor flashed a set of keys attached to a chain that he drew from the pocket of his greatcoat and rattled them ostentatiously. He unlocked the door of the buffet cabin, disappeared inside and then emerged a few moments later bearing a half litre glass bottle and a plastic cup.

Knox handed over twenty dollars in denominations of five each. He was not at all sure whether this amount would cover both the cost of the ticket and the unknown booze provided by the conductor, but the man looked at the notes, held them up to the lamplight above their heads and grunted something unintelligible Knox took as a sign of satisfaction.

For his part, Knox was busy examining the bottle he’d just purchased. It contained a cloudy green liquid. The label gave no clue, at least in English, as to its contents. It was decorated with an obscure design, something five-pointed and akin to a swastika. Certainly, at least, the legend ‘85% vol’ inspired confidence.

“It’s good,” the conductor said, as if aware an American would not be familiar with the brand. “It is the Nepenthe drink.”

“A brand of absinthe?” Knox asked.

“Better. You drink. Have a good trip.” He laughed and then shuffled off, making his way along the length of the corridor, swaying with the motion of the train.

Knox went in the opposite direction, back towards the coach in which he’d boarded the train. He wanted to lose himself in the strange green liquid as quickly as possible and feel it coursing down his throat, filling his stomach with warmth and turning his brains into a soothing grey mush. He noticed that his fellow passengers appeared to be as uninterested in mingling with one another as was he; they sat as far apart from one another as they could, in individual compartments where possible, or at the opposite ends of seating where a compartment was already occupied. They slumped

in their places as if they had already travelled for hours and hours. Some were either already drunk or else in a dull confused state between sleep and waking. One could not easily tell which.

He pulled open the door to the unoccupied compartment at the rear where he'd boarded and sat down on the edge of the seat, gazing at the liquid in the bottle finding its level as the train rattled over points on the track. It had a screw top, for which he was grateful; since his hands still trembled to the extent he was not confident about working a cork free with his jack-knife (say rather, he thought, grimly, *murder weapon*). As it was, he still fumbled with the plastic cup whilst pouring out a large measure, and almost split its contents. He knocked back the first dose swiftly, coughing as the liquid passed down into his insides. Christ, he thought, what is this stuff? It felt as if someone had kicked him in the head. He leant forward, feeling a wave of nausea, and was momentarily afraid he would vomit. But after the second shot, taken as quickly as the first, all the unpleasant sensations passed and he was overcome with a deadening numbness. He could not feel the ends of his fingers and toes, his anxiety ebbed away, the tide of fear was at last drawing out, and he exhaled what seemed to be an eternal breath. He slumped back into the long seat and nestled the bottle on his lap, watching the green liquid inside tumble like a captured ocean wave.

The darkness outside made it seem, from within, as if the train were stationary. Knox flopped along the length of the seat towards the carriage window and peered out through the glass into the gloom. He saw vague shapes and branches of trees that had not been sufficiently cut back—their sharp ends scraped along the sides and roof of the train.

His eyes refocused and instead of looking through the glass, he now saw his own reflection on the surface of the window. His gaze was filled with hatred. There was a sneer on his lips. Knox was terrified the reflection would reach across the divide and strangle him. He backed away from the sight, afraid of its taking on the appearance of the torn and bloodied revenant he'd seen earlier. He heard a voice in his head, the same voice as before, but this time the words it spoke were different; *"you come closer,"* it said, "*you draw close to me*".

Knox pulled down the blinds on all the windows and poured himself another dose of the potent bad medicine. His head was swimming, and he heard the sound of his teeth chattering in his mouth. The compartment

around him blurred, the overhead luggage racks, the electric lamps and the advertisements on the walls faded from view and he passed out.

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When he awoke it must have been hours later. His watch had stopped, so he had no precise way of telling just how long it had been. But he knew he still travelled by night for it was dark outside; he had lifted the blind a little to see if it were daylight yet. His mouth was dry and his lips were encrusted with the scum of dried saliva.

The half-drunk bottle of booze had wedged itself between the cushions of the long seat. Alongside it was the remains of the plastic cup, crushed by the weight of Knox's body where he had lain slumped after having passed out. The light from the compartment's electric lamps hurt his eyes and so he took out his mirror shades from the glasses case he kept in the breast pocket of his tweed jacket, and put them on. The hangover was so bad he felt he would never recover from it. He took a swig from the bottle, but the taste made the bile rise in his throat. He decided to go in search of the train conductor in order to find out how much further it was to Losenef.

As he passed the compartment adjacent to his own he heard a groaning from within and stopped to look inside. A solitary passenger was sprawled across the floor, face down and motionless. The man was dressed in a badly crumpled light grey suit covered with dark brown stains. He had a foul odour about him, of eggs that had turned rotten. Knox considered, for a moment, ignoring him but then the groan came again and this time it was louder and more prolonged than before. The man in the grey suit had, like Knox, been drinking the green spirit. An empty bottle of it lay just outside his reach.

Knox knelt down, pinching his nose and covering his mouth with one hand to guard against the stench and, with the other, he grabbed the shoulder of the man's jacket and turned his body over.

His face was a grisly ruin. Half of it had been eaten away by the maggots that writhed and burrowed through yellowish flesh. There was nothing at all left of the eyes; only vacant sockets remained. And then the corpse groaned for a third time, a hollow and despairing groan that issued from unimaginable depths of suffering. Something conscious existed within the shell.

Knox backed away, leaving the hideous cadaver face-upright. And still it continued to issue its uncanny cries.

The next compartment along contained a similar horror. The occupant, a woman with long dusty blonde hair, faced the wall with her hands reached out as if clutching at it for support. She made heartrending sobbing and snuffling noises. But she was dead. The skin on her hands was flaking away like paint on a weather beaten wall, and Knox was glad he was spared the sight of her face, for the malformed sound of sobbing could only emanate from a deformed mouth.

The litany of terror was repeated throughout the whole of the carriage and, so too, throughout the next. All the passengers were dead but not one was silent.

Knox took a deep breath and leant with his back to the wall behind him. He took off his mirror shades, rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, and spat on the floor. This was junk, he thought. He'd written stories worse than this in his time. He didn't believe any of it. He must have bashed his head on something whilst he was sozzled, causing him to hallucinate. He had impacted his skull, affecting the brain, resulting in a wild bout of concussion. The more he thought of it, the more the idea fitted. He was having a psychotic episode. Nothing more. He had killed no-one back in Strasgol; he'd only imagined he had. All this business on the train was brought on by a bump to the head. He put his shades back on and grinned. Then he ran his fingers over the entirety of his skull, working through the mass of red hair that covered it. His grin evaporated. There was no damage to his skull.

The train began to slow down and finally drew to a halt amidst a grinding screech. From further along the corridor, out of the buffet cabin, the conductor emerged. He'd removed the long scarf he had wound around the lower half of his face. Now Knox could see why it had been covered up. There was no lower half of his face. Where there should have been a bottom jaw there was instead a gaping bloody hollow. The conductor's voice issued from a vacuum, and without tongue or lips should have been impossible to form. Yet the sound was as real as when he had spoken previously.

"Last stop, sir," the conductor breathed, "Losenef."

What was odd was that, after disembarking from the train, Knox found Losenef to be an exact duplicate of Strasgol and, moreover, he had arrived an hour earlier than he departed. It was only in the Zacharas Café, having spotted the duplicate of himself drinking Jack Daniels, that he

realised the truth. He’d wait a little longer and then try yet again to take his revenge. Eventually, he hoped, he would succeed.

The Man Who Collected Machen

I am writing these lines from a deserted residence situated, I suspect, in the maze of streets to the southeast of King's Cross, that dim region of London Incognita. I found the house, abandoned for years, when I was lost. It is a squat Georgian villa in the most squalid quarter of the district, its mock-portico decayed, its peeling stucco exterior riddled with weeds. I know now I cannot find my way back from there, and this fact must ultimately put an end to my former existence.

My name is Robert Lundwick. After I had turned twenty-one, in 1969, I came into possession of an income, a legacy from a distant relation whom I scarcely knew. Formerly I had hoped this income would prove sufficient for all my needs. Alas, the gulf between dream and reality! Legal costs had drained the capital of a great deal of its worth. What remained for me was a mere pittance, enough to keep me from starving but not enough to allow for any degree of comfort. I had long ago determined I would devote my life to literary scholarship. Not, let me emphasise, the dry-as-dust scholarship of academe, the crushing orthodoxy to be found in universities, but rather the recondite scholarship that is a journey into the unknown. I refer, chiefly, to those dead authors whose works savour of the uncanny and the marvellous, authors whose unique perspectives are beyond the self-stultifying purview of the modern critical mania for so-called realism. For my part, I chose the mysteries, and the hierophant of mystery was an obscure author called Arthur Machen. Although I had done the best I could to collect a small library of his books, carried with me from lodging to lodging in a battered suitcase as evictions forced me on, I had not sufficient funds for the purchase of the rarer volumes whose cost was beyond my limited means. And so, like many a poor scholar before me, it was necessary I devoted myself to the Reading Room of the British Library.

Dome of a million forlorn hopes! Dome beneath which labour benighted dreamers and unfortunate seekers after knowledge; victims of vanity, slaves of solitude! A legion of bibliophiles weighed down by the learning of centuries. They lift their eyes from their musty tomes but infrequently, gazing with bleary eyes at the enclosed immensity in which they have chosen to incarcerate themselves. Oh monstrous dome! Draining the life from all those scholarly unfortunates who cluster in the radiating

rows of desks below. In truth no refuge thou art, no shelter and no haven. Titanic, far-lifted and terrible dome; would that those who come to thee rather fled at once from the silent shades paying thee homage!

It is with an uncanny recollection I now think back to the day I first took my place at my desk and began my study of the work of Arthur Machen. One of the dusty assistants brought me the five items I had selected from the massed ranks of the library catalogue. The items were four in number; the biography by Charlton and Reynolds, the Goldstone and Sweetser bibliography, *Precious Balms* and *The Children of the Pool and Other Stories*. These were books I had heard of only by reputation and although I had once seen a copy of the last of these august tomes in the closed, glass-fronted bookcase of a certain bookseller in Bloomsbury, its exorbitant price tag forced its swift return to the shelf. I made copious entries in my notebook, drawing deeply from the biography. I plunged with joy into my researches, was appalled by the notices Machen had reproduced from ignorant critics in *Precious Balms*, and when I came to the bibliography I realised the extent of his more elusive literary productions, scattered throughout periodicals and American limited editions that had avoided entry in the catalogue of the British Library.

But I came time and again to my desk under the dome during the following weeks, determined to mine the seam of literary gold at my disposal until I had exhausted it. Volumes that had eluded me, such as *The Green Round*, *The Anatomy of Tobacco*, *The Secret Glory*, *Dr. Stiggins* and *The Canning Wonder* were pored over in excitement and triumph.

There were disappointments too. Upon consulting the library's copy of *The Cosy Room and Other Stories* I found that a vandal had cut out the pages containing a story called "The Lost Club" and, in their place, gummed in a single black page. At the time I did not realise the significance of this deed. I knew of "The Lost Club" only as an obscure Machen tale first published in the journal *The Whirlwind* in 1890. Although it had been subsequently reprinted in the American edition of *The Shining Pyramid* published by Covici-McGee in 1923, I found that, here too, the vandal had been at work.

At night, when I dragged myself back to my dingy bedsit in Soho, I would open my battered suitcase library and read again by candlelight those works I was fortunate to possess for myself; amongst which were *Holy*

Terrors, *The London Adventure*, *The Hill of Dreams* and *The House of Souls.*

But when at my desk, beneath the oppressive dome, it was to the bibliography I most frequently turned, and I dreamt of acquiring for myself all those fugitive items listed therein. I had consulted the book on so many occasions that the assistants of the library often brought it to me with an indulgent smile.

During one of my consultations within its pages, a gentleman who often took the desk adjacent to mine, whilst pursuing researches of his own, finally addressed me in a low whisper. For weeks we had been on nodding acquaintance, but as time passed I could not shake off the feeling he had begun to take an interest in my choice of research material. For my own part, I scrupulously tried to avoid taking an interest in the spines of the volumes on his desk.

“Please excuse me,” he said in a low voice, “but I cannot help having noticed you have a dedicated interest in the works of Arthur Machen. I have something of an interest in his life and work myself.”

These words arrested my attention and I took the opportunity, for the first time, to properly examine his appearance and not merely glance at him. He was a striking figure, very tall and acutely thin, and dressed in an olive-coloured corduroy suit. He wore a crimson and paisley cravat rather than a necktie around his throat. With his natty little moustache he looked like an out of work actor. But for all his sartorial flamboyance, it was obvious that he was a very ill man. His skin was almost the colour of cigarette ash.

His smile was warm enough, but there was something about his eyes that was dead and emotionless. He stared for longer than was normal, as if he were involved in some game of wills, whereby he would not be the first to blink or drop his gaze.

“My name is Aloysius Condor,” he said.

It had occurred to me that the man might be a homosexual. Since the recent legalisation of the practice by parliament, such individuals had appeared to multiply in the “let-it-all-hang-out” permissive era of Carnaby Street, the Beatles and what some had lately taken to calling the “Swinging Sixties”. Being of a liberal cast of mind, I tried not to react to the possibility by displaying any sense of unease in his presence, my duty, after all, being to respond in the manner of one polite scholar addressing another in the spirit of a commonality of interests.

“Mine is Robert Lundwick, pleased to meet you,” I replied.

We shook hands over the desk. His grasp was cold, flabby and dry. He suggested that we continue our conversation later on, outside the hushed confines of the reading room, so as not to disturb anyone.

An hour later and we shared a table inside the Museum Tavern, on the other side of Great Russell Street, and it was swiftly clear that his bibliographic knowledge of Machen more than justified his claim to have an interest in the great author’s works. Over several pints of bitter it soon became apparent that he was, in fact, one of the foremost collectors of Machen’s work in this country.

“You will find,” he said, “the holdings of the British Library are somewhat deficient when compared to those of the Newport Library. At present, they possess the most extensive collection of Machen’s work in public hands. But, of course, it is a trial to be constantly shuttling back and forth between London and Newport. For my own part, I boast that my collection is the most extensive in private hands.”

Condor took out a packet of Craven “A” cigarettes, jammed one between his lips, lit it with a fancy silver Zippo and proceeded to puff away nonchalantly and waited to see what effect his claim would have upon me.

“How interesting,” I said. “My own means are so limited that the acquisition of a substantial personal library is beyond me.”

“I should be pleased to allow you access to my books, should you so desire it, but on one condition,” he said, smiling below his dead eyes.

“Which is?” I asked.

“That you consider joining a club of which I have the honour to be the current President.”

The look on my face must have betrayed my thoughts.

“It is not a club of Uranian aspect, if that is what causes you to pale so,” Condor said.

“Then what is it?” I responded.

“It is called ‘The Lost Club’, doubtless you have heard the name before, or even seen it written down?”

I nodded assent, and recalled that the tale had been cut out from the copy of *The Cosy Room and Other Stories*, so I had not read it. I vaguely wondered whether this act of vandalism had been the work of Condor himself and, if so, to what purpose?

“Well and good, then,” he said.

After we finished our drinks, we got up from the table and he suggested that I accompany him to his flat just off the north end of Judd Street, where I could see for myself what a treasure-trove of Machen items were in his possession. I readily agreed, having convinced myself that ‘The Lost Club’ was nothing more than a strangely secretive Arthur Machen Appreciation Society.

The weather was wintry, and the gusting wind icy-cold. Condor laboured along the pavement. He was out of breath after having walked little more than a hundred yards and so I was not surprised when he suggested we take a black cab, at his expense, rather than walk to our destination. We hailed a passing vehicle and I climbed in first. Condor followed behind, and wheezed out his address in Judd Street to the taxi driver. We arrived at our destination within the space of five minutes.

His flat was located in the basement of a nondescript house with tatty net curtains showing through dirty paned windows. As we went inside, I was taken aback by the musty odour that wafted from his living quarters. Cracks ran up and down the walls, his carpet was threadbare and there was the constant suggestion of mice scratching and running up and down behind the skirting boards. We passed along a dimly-lit corridor and he opened the door at the end with a theatrical flourish.

“My inner sanctum, pray enter,” he said.

The room was lined on all four sides with bookshelves. As I glanced around at the titles of the volumes, my heart leapt. It contained hundreds of books by Machen, as well as directly related titles by other authors. Here was a shelf dedicated entirely to varying editions of *The Secret Glory* and another to *The Hill of Dreams*. My gaze could scarcely take it all in at once, and the titles of all the other works by Machen flashed by as I tried to absorb the extent of his library.

Condor crossed the room and casually selected a book, apparently at random. It was the Carbonnek 1888 edition of *The Chronicle of Clemendy, or The History of the IX Joyous Journeys*.

“Look at this, won’t you?” he said, smiling and showing off his perfectly even but nicotine-stained teeth.

I eagerly sought the title page and there, in a flowing hand, was the inscription:

To my dearest wife, Amy, in memory of last year's wanderings in the land of the Silures,

Your devoted Arthur

I marvelled at the thing for the briefest of moments, before Condor replaced it on the shelf and took down another volume. It was a leather-bound copy of a fabulously rare 1904 book called *The House of the Hidden Light*.

"I had the pages bound at my own expense, since Welby, the publisher, did not trouble to do so," he said.

My head was swimming, and Condor smirked, pressing home his advantage.

"But really, these are mere trifles. Perhaps you would care to see some of the more obscure items that I own?"

"Trifles? Do you mean to say you have things rarer still?" I replied.

He didn't respond but pointed to an antique bureau in the corner of the room beside a pile of mouldering copies of *Horlicks Magazine* and *The Academy*, and taking a key from his pocket proceeded to unlock a drawer bearing a label with the legend "Obscure Machenalia". As he rattled the key in the lock, I saw some sepia photographs scattered on the top of the bureau, seemingly left there for filing at a future date. One pictured a man in a frockcoat and a top-hat. His black beard was of Rasputin length. By his side was a taller thin woman with dark hair in a white wedding dress. The lady was attractive, and appeared to be several years older than her bridegroom. The man's eyes and expression made me think it was Machen, but before I had time to dwell upon the matter further, Condor called my attention to the contents of the drawer.

"Here," he said, "is a clipping from a society journal of a tale entitled 'The Resurrection of the Dead', long thought lost by Machen scholars. Here too, the Eyre and Spottiswoode proofs for *Fleet Street Memories and Recollections*, as well as A.M.'s private *Clarendon Road Diaries*. Doubtless chapters five, six and seven, the unpublished chapters that is, of *The Secret Glory* will have some interest for you. The seventh provides an unexpurgated account of Ambrose Meyrick's 'Red Martyrdom' in the East and the final destiny of the Sangraal. Perhaps though, it is with Machen's earlier work that your enthusiasm is most fired? Here is a little pamphlet of his poetry printed in Hereford in 1881; its title is *Eleusinia*."

“Incredible!” I said. “How on earth did you manage to obtain all these things? I can scarcely believe my own eyes! You have a positive mania for collecting rarities.”

A frown gripped Condor’s face at the mention of the word “mania”. His eyes narrowed and he closed the drawer behind him.

“It is true that my quest has been single-minded, since I have allowed no obstacles to stand in my way, even the law.”

“Come, come,” I said, trying to lighten his mood, “surely there must be other private collections of a comparable, if not an equal, comprehensiveness.”

“I have done my best to absorb from other collections what I require for my own. Where resistance has been met, it has been quashed utterly, usually with cash or blackmail, only rarely more extreme methods. You see, I am not a man to cross,” Condor replied.

At that moment, I realised for the first time he was leading up to something.

“For instance,” he said, “you possess a signed copy of the 1923 Richards Press *The House of Souls* with the original dust jacket. I have all the other editions of that title, signed, but not that one. You wonder how I know this? Let me confess. I take a keen interest in all those who consult the Machen titles held by the British Library. I employ a man on the inside to pass me the number of the desk they use, as well as a record of their home addresses. Then I follow them around until I have all the information I require. Landladies, like servants, can be must obliging in noting down the contents of personal libraries, provided they are recompensed liberally for their efforts.”

“This has been a most interesting evening,” I said, “but it’s late and I must be getting back to my place in Soho.”

He screeched at me: “You’ll not find your way home. Don’t you understand? From the moment you found the black page, a certain process has been set in motion.”

I left Condor standing there and staring at me with his dead eyes, watching my back, I suppose, as I made my way along the smelly corridor and up the flight of stairs to the streets outside.

I wasn’t on Judd Street. In fact I had no idea where I was. After several minutes of wandering around in circles I decided to have a drink in a pub before last orders. My watch showed fifteen minutes before ten.

Obviously what had happened had affected me more than I realised. Eventually I found a place, The Quill, on Accrington Street.

By the time I next checked my watch, it was gone eleven, last orders had come and gone, and the few remaining customers were beginning to file out. The landlord had already been around twice, collecting glasses and ashtrays, telling diehard stragglers to *please* drink up. I was sat in a corner booth and looked around at the snug interior of the pub, taking it in a final time before leaving. The ceiling had browned with the exhalations of thousands of smokers, the flock wallpaper had been up for decades and, where it had peeled away, framed posters dating from the 1940s had covered the gaps. The electric wall-lamps were ornately wrought and their coloured glass bowls filtered the light, providing a cosy orange hue to the surroundings. Over on the other side of the bar, in the snug, they kept a welcoming coal-fire burning in the winter months. It consisted of just a few smouldering embers at this late hour.

The landlord abruptly turned off the background music that had been playing. I downed the last of my pint and pulled on my long woollen scarf and overcoat. I nodded at the landlord as he passed by, but got no response, and I thought better of asking him for directions to Soho. Instead I braced myself for the darkness and freezing cold that waited outside.

Accrington Street was deserted. It was one of those recondite by-ways, with terraced houses on both sides dating from the early 1800s. Each number had a railed “Area”, an open drop at the front of the building used as an entrance or exit by downstairs servants, by tradesmen, or to collect the coal from cellars under the pavement.

I still had no clear idea of my route home. I knew vaguely that I should strike south, but was unsure which streets would lead me in the right general direction.

Ahead was a street leading up a hill that seemed very out of place in the otherwise flat district. I climbed and found myself in a circular series of tall and dilapidated buildings with an overgrown garden in the centre. The hand painted street name high up on one of the houses told me I was in a place called Percival Round. It was constructed on the slope of the hill and the buildings at the top end were on a much higher level than those further down. Frost was biting hard now, and I wrapped my long scarf another loop around my neck. The Round was a survival from another age, like Accrington Street probably dating from the early 1800s, but here there was

scarcely any sign of occupancy. It was as if the entire place had been abandoned decades ago and then utterly forgotten by everyone until I had stumbled across it.

I had the bizarre notion of having entered into occult territory.

Even the streetlamps seemed dimmer here, as if working from an antique electrical supply. In contrast, the stars were maddeningly bright, punctuating the darkness with an icy glare, strong enough even to cast dim shadows.

Had I then, lost my mind? Was everything around me some grotesque hallucination brought on by a disordered brain?

Well then, I thought, should I turn back or go forward? As far as I was able to determine I was in no actual danger.

So I went forward.

Percival Round became Predoit Place, a little street just as deserted and desolate as before, but containing two-storey stucco villas with crumbling front porticos, instead of tottering four-storey hulks. I could make out the villas' flaking paintwork, long neglected, and the interminable series of cracks and fissures that time had wrought on the exteriors. Still there was no sign of any living soul, even when I came into a larger space called Layburn Square. Here the buildings were grander, more respectable than the middle-class dwellings in the streets that surrounded them. These Georgian edifices had been built for the well-to-do and even window taxes had caused no casement to be bricked up for reasons of economy. I entered one of them and made myself a bed as best I could.

I awoke the following day at dawn. The first rays of the rising sun illuminated the rooftops, turning their tiles and ramshackle chimneys a vivid shade of unearthly red. As the sun climbed higher in the sky I wandered through the deserted streets, watching windows light up like the opening of innumerable furnace doors. The desolate region was transfigured and, as if in sympathy with the change being wrought around me, a revelation burst forth from the depths of my soul.

For centuries have visionaries trod the ancient streets of the capital, even unto an age before records began. When the Roman legions carried their banners through the paved streets, they were here. When the Anglo-Saxon tribes had set up their encampments within the ruins, after the Romans had withdrawn, they were here. Down through the centuries, unmarked in the annals of history, during the Black Death and the Great

Fire, when London turned from the Old Faith to fanatic Protestantism, even from belief to unbelief, when the Nazis rained down death from the skies, they had been here, unyielding, immovable, unchanging, holding fast to the Old Land buried beneath brick, stone, concrete and tarmac—the Old Land that could not be forsaken.

And the Old Land stretched forth its limbs in the trees on the heaths, and the forests, and the woods that were dotted across the city. They were reminders that the Old Land is not dead, but merely slumbers.

In Layburn Square, poised on the mount above the mystic metropolis, I saw a mighty tumulus suffused with a gold and crimson glory; and I saw the mysteries through magical eyes. I smelt rare spices carried on the breeze, along with the fragrances of the apple trees and the myriads of wildflowers stretching as far as the eye could see.

I think of the Man Who Collected Machen, doubtless now gloating over my signed copy of *The House of Souls* and I pity him. Although, in our differing fashions, we both belong to the Lost Club, for him it is the end. For me it is merely the *beginning*. For now I dwell amidst visions splendid, and count myself blessed to be an inhabitant of the City of Transmutations, of eternal London, of Avalon. For I have become the Man who Believed Machen.

THYXXOLQU

Owen Barclay's first encounter with the mystery occurred on the top deck of a number 134 bus as he travelled into work. He had been looking over one of the free London morning tabloids with mounting disgust, when the bus turned a corner and he caught sight of a roadside advertising hoarding opposite. He glanced up from the paper's photograph of pop star Julia Carnage falling out of a limousine drunk at four in the morning, and saw, through the rain-scarred window, the ad for a new brand of canned beans. It depicted a smiling young woman with a well-toned physique holding up a tin. There was nothing out of the ordinary about this, but what puzzled Barclay were the logo and the words above the image. They were in some foreign language, but the characters were not in Western, Arabic, Cyrillic, Mandarin, Japanese nor any other type of alphabet that he recognised. He supposed that it was some new kind of marketing gimmick, but the script intrigued him. Although he didn't recognise the language, it seemed somehow distantly familiar, and he had a strong sense of déjà vu, as if he'd once known it and had forgotten it until now.

The recollection bothered him during the day, and he thought of the ad when he should have been concentrating on the emails arriving from clients on his office computer. He stared at the screen in a dead fashion, not absorbing the information in front of him, his eyes glazing over, until he brought on a headache. He tried to clear the backlog of filing that had built up on his desk, but the sight of all the correspondence and having to go through it carefully made him nauseous. Something about the sight of words written in English was making him ill. It was only later in the day that he discovered the effect was not confined to English. A French client had sent him an email and, although Barclay was fluent in French (as well as in German, Spanish and Russian) he could scarcely bring himself to go through the whole communication, although it was a matter of contractual importance to the company. Somehow, by shuffling papers aimlessly around his desk, Barclay got through the day, and he left the building harbouring a sense of resentment at the canned beans ad for having succeeded in embedding itself in his mind.

On the bus home, he took a window seat and readied his mobile phone to take a photo of the ad as he passed it by. He was determined to try and

find some clue as to the meaning of the words in the unknown language. The bus slowed down in rush hour traffic as it passed the roadside hoarding and he captured a clear crisp image. He scrutinised it during the whole of the journey, almost missing his stop.

Barclay prepared himself a light dinner and ate idly as he transcribed the words from the image stored in his mobile phone onto paper, and then rifled through his reference books in order to identify the language and decipher the meaning. He could find no trace of information about it.

After three hours of fruitless labour he was so angry at himself for dedicating time to what he now considered a worthless hoax and a definite marketing gimmick that he deleted the image from the phone, tore up the paper upon which he'd written down the mysterious characters and gave up on the whole investigation. He couldn't bear to read any more of the novel he'd started a week before, since he suffered from a sudden return of the same word sickness he'd experienced earlier in the day, and instead watched television until sleep crept up on him.

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Travelling into work on the same bus route the next day, Barclay again scanned the tacky tabloid newspaper that was provided free of charge each morning. He told himself that he would only complete the crossword and would not, on this journey, allow himself to be annoyed by the celebrity gossip that infested its pages. But as he leafed through it, in search of the crossword, he stopped at an article that caught his eye. Unusually, it had no accompanying photo of a drunken reality TV star, a scantily clad footballer's wife or even a pop singer with tell-tale traces of a white powder around their nostrils. But more unusually, it was written in an obscure language. Barclay could not be entirely certain, but strongly suspected that it was the language of the billboard advertisement he'd seen yesterday. He carefully tore around the article and put the piece of paper into his pocket. He had no wish to carry the whole tabloid around with him for the rest of the day and run the risk of being mistaken for someone who had an interest in its drivelling contents. He wished, however, to retain a copy of the article itself since he realised that the significance of this new language's appearance was not confined to a cheap marketing gimmick. Now that he had more than half a dozen words from which to make a comparison, he might even be able to find out more about it.

When the bus reached the corner where stood the billboard advertisement for canned beans, he saw that the one adjacent to it now sported a new ad for a brand of pills delivering its message in the same mysterious language. Was it aimed, he thought, at some freshly arrived wave of immigrant workers from a cryptic corner of the European Union? During the last thirty years Barclay had seen the steady increase, from almost zero, of Turkish, Bangladeshi, Ethiopian, Polish, Jordanian and many other shop signs in London. But ads in a foreign language were rarer. He recalled a few in Spanish and French, but those had been for imported beers.

He had no luck with the crossword. The clues appeared to make no sense to him and he could scarcely comprehend what answers they were supposed to suggest. It was the first time that he had been defeated by one of them.

Later that day, in the office, as Barclay again tried to avoid looking at his computer screen, and during which gradually all correspondence on paper filled him with nausea, he noticed the t-shirt of one of his work colleagues as he passed by Barclay's desk. This employee, James Monck, had recently been on holiday abroad, but had come back pale and sickly as if he'd actually spent a few weeks in a windowless room shooting up heroin. The garment he wore was an ill-fitting brown t-shirt, about a size too small, and it clung to his emaciated torso like a tight second skin. But it was the circular blue lettering at the centre of the t-shirt that drew Barclay's attention. It wound around the silhouette of a town with a clustered multitude of steeples and domes. The lettering was in the obscure language that was appearing in his life on all sides.

"You picked that up on your holiday, did you?" Barclay asked him, pointing to his chest.

"That's right," Monck replied. "I hated to come back."

"Where did you go?" Barclay said.

"Just over the edge."

"Where did you buy the souvenir t-shirt? I don't recognise the language or the silhouette of the town."

"What, this?" Monck said. "Oh I got it in Qxwthyyothl."

Barclay's expression turned quizzical at the last word.

"Which is where?" he asked.

"Qxwthyyothl is the capital city of Thyxxolqu."

Barclay took the article from his pocket that he'd torn out of the tabloid newspaper. He flattened out its crumpled surface and passed it over to Monck.

"Do you recognise this language?" he said, waiting as Monck examined the text.

"This is uxwqol in Thyxxolqus," Monck finally replied.

Barclay stared at him blankly.

"I said," Monck repeated, "this is written in Thyxxolqus, which is the language spoken in Thyxxolqu."

"What type of script is this? I've not seen anything like it before. It doesn't even look Indo-European in origin."

"I'm not an expert, and I wouldn't know."

Monck handed back the fragment from the newspaper.

"Are there many people from this country you visited in London, do you know?"

Monck grinned at the remark. His teeth appeared to be in the first stages of rot.

"Thyxxolqu yho quoxlu," he said, in a strangely guttural tone before abruptly turning on his heels and walking away.

Barclay wrote down the words he'd heard from Monck in phonetics, and managed to conquer his revulsion with the computer screen long enough to punch the characters into an internet search engine. He tried as many different combinations of the rendering he'd made as he could think of, but none yielded results. The article itself, written in the Thyxxolqus script, was of no assistance to him, since it could not be rendered by any of the keyboard language options available on the computer.

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After he had finished doing nothing in the office, Barclay stopped off at the British Library. He did not care much for the hard angled building on the Euston Road that had replaced the old reading room beneath the mighty dome in the British Museum. His objections were not only architectural, for students who regarded it with, in Barclay's view, much less reverence than the former space, constantly filled the new one. They treated it like a café, or meeting place, and he was concerned that proper research had given way to its being used to spend time searching online via laptop computers or else to improve one's social circle on cyberspace. Barclay's reader pass was of long-standing, and he was known by sight amongst the assistants and the

security personnel, who waved him through with no more than a token glance at his card.

He consulted with the staff as to the correct volumes that might enable him to identify the script used in the article from the tabloid newspaper and was grateful for their assistance in seeking references to the language that Monck referred to phonetically as “Thyxxolqus”. However, they were only able to suggest a number of indices from antique and almost-forgotten encyclopaedias that proved, after consultation, to be of no value. There was a single reference to Thyxxolqus (rendered as “Tyxxollqus”) in a cross-reference to an obscure article reprinted in the 1862 edition of *The Collected Works of Thomas De Quincey*. It came from the October 1821 edition of *The London Magazine* and was written under the pseudonym “XYZ”. The book contained this article (which was entitled “Voices from the Grave”) but was kept off-site and could only be delivered the next day. Barclay requested the item anyway and resolved to return.

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On the bus back home from the British Library, Barclay noticed a new development. Above the windows, on the curved angle of the wall before the ceiling, it was usual for the bus company to display advertisements. On this particular bus, they were all in what appeared to be Thyxxolqus. Moreover, someone sitting directly in front of Barclay was conducting, via his mobile phone, a staccato buzzing conversation in the same language. Once the conversation was over, Barclay could not refrain from lightly tapping the passenger on the shoulder, and enquiring whether he could translate the advertisements since he appeared to be a speaker of Thyxxolqus.

The man appeared a little confused by Barclay’s interest and gaped at him momentarily as if he did not quite comprehend the request made to him in English.

Finally he responded.

“Do you mean to say huxxkl nyzzzt for yourself? Are you krhjxjk?”

“Where did you learn this language? Are you English?” Barclay replied, conscious that the two of them had drawn the surreptitious attention of all the other silent passengers.

“English? Of course I’m ghxcllu English! Hxchxc joke nyzzzt hythxxu off,” he barked back.

An elderly Indian lady, dressed in a patterned sari, sitting alongside the passenger in front then joined in the conversation.

“Please,” she said, “let’s not jhjkzz, there’s no juxxchu fzzzghal and I’m running chjuzzcu yho fghgrxx.”

Behind him, Barclay heard more words spoken in Thyxxolqus and turned to see a teenage Spanish couple chattering to one another.

“Qué divertido mi amor. Nxhzzz uglaghk no habla jkgqixx.”

Someone else said something in Thyxxolqus. Pure, undiluted Thyxxolqus. It was a small Japanese man clad in a pin-striped business suit. His beetling eyebrows were raised and a look of loathing crossed his face.

As Barclay watched his mouth open and close, forming the strange, guttural words, he saw that the Easterner’s teeth were blackened stumps housed in yellow, rotting gums. This Japanese man with a decayed mouth then got to his feet and appeared intent on grabbing hold of Barclay. But after his first unsuccessful lunge, Barclay was already on his feet and hurtling down the steps to the ground floor of the bus. He pushed the emergency exit release button above the doors and jumped clear of the vehicle. Barclay had planned to take to his heels, losing himself in the crowds in the ticket hall of nearby Camden Town Underground Station. But he landed awkwardly, his head thumped against the cold concrete of the pavement and he blacked out.

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Barclay had a splitting headache and his vision was slightly distorted. He rose swiftly into consciousness, adrenaline surging into his veins as the memory of what had happened flooded over him. He was lying on a trolley in what seemed to be a small room that smelt of antiseptic. Someone in a white coat was leaning over him and taking his pulse.

“No sudden movements, please,” he said, “you’ve taken a nasty bump to the head. Concussion is quite likely.”

Barclay’s mind raced. He wanted to believe that the horrific images that assailed him were a nightmare brought on by the damage he’d sustained. He longed to believe that none of what he’d seen had been real. His blurred vision denied him a clear view of the face of the doctor who was close at hand. He could not make out the man’s mouth as being anything but vague black smear, too indistinct to be discerned as either normal or monstrously decayed.

“I’m Doctor Pearce,” he said, “you’re in University College Hospital. Can you see how many fingers I’m holding up?”

Barclay squinted. It looked like three to him. The fingers swam in and out of focus. Three, well, maybe four.

“Swallow these tablets,” the doctor said, “they’ll put you to sleep for a while and we’ll talk again in the morning. I want you to stay in overnight for observation. Just to be on the safe side.”

He lifted Barclay’s head, put a couple of pills into his mouth and then brought a paper cup half full of water with which to wash them down.

Barclay gurgled, swallowed the tablets and fell into a deep sleep shortly afterwards.

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When he awoke, his head felt clearer and his vision had cleared substantially. He found himself in a deserted hospital ward. The beds were unmade and had been slept in and then abandoned only recently. He got up, clutched the white gown in which he was clad tightly to his body, and wandered barefoot across the cold linoleum on the floor. There was no-one behind the nurse’s desk in the middle of the ward. The only noise he could hear was coming from the corridor. As he approached the source, he recognised it as the sound of a television programme, and it seeped through the windowed door of a patients’ recreation room. He opened the door and found himself inside a dingy space with several chairs and their occupants, all facing a television set mounted two-thirds of the way up the far wall.

The occupants, all patients in hospital gowns, were staring at the screen and miming along to the words being spoken by a newsreader. This broadcaster was talking, Barclay was certain, in Thyxxolqus. His mouth was deformed as if eaten away by decay. Moreover, the mouths of the patients listening were the same; like a soggy hole in a crumpled sheet of paper. Now he realised what the Thyxxolqu language reminded him of, as he listened to the swarm of people speaking it all at once. It was like the buzzing of infuriated bluebottle flies.

Barclay felt a hand grasp his shoulder. He turned around and the man in the white coat who stood behind him leant forward and whispered into his ear. It was Doctor Pearce.

“Let’s get out of here and find somewhere where we can talk.”

They exited, took a couple of turns, and then Pearce let Barclay into an office. Once they were inside, he locked the door after him and slumped

down into a wing-backed chair behind a desk. He drew out a packet of cigarettes from a drawer, offered Barclay one (who refused it) and then lit up. His hands were trembling and he coughed after the first drag. It looked as if he'd not smoked for a very long time.

"What do you think is going on?" the doctor said.

"What do *I* think is going on?" Barclay replied, suddenly feeling, given the circumstances, ridiculously self-conscious in his patient's gown. He was arrested by the thought that this might be an examination of his own mental state. Had the doctor seen what he had seen?

"I've known nothing like it. The disease, or whatever it is, appears to be airborne, attacks orally and causes rapid and massive cellular degeneration," Pearce said.

Barclay exhaled, letting out an audible sigh of relief.

"I'm not even sure," Pearce continued, "that it's a disease at all. I've been up all night, taking blood samples from patients afflicted with it. There's no trace of invading bacteria, no trace of a virus. And yet the symptoms point towards leprosy or something of that ilk. It's like the ghost of a disease possessing people."

"The unearthly language they're speaking," Barclay replied, "that seems to be the key."

"Do you know," said Pearce, "I believe that the corruption allows the infected to articulate the language more clearly than uncorrupted mouths. I wonder if it doesn't go right down into the throat, affecting the larynx and the voice box. What if the language is the disease itself?"

"I can't follow what you're saying. How can a disease be a ghost, how can language affect the material world?" Barclay, having felt a surge of relief at the fact that Pearce was able to share his comprehension that something had gone horribly wrong with the world, now felt disorientated at the bizarre explanation Pearce had formulated.

"I think the process begins in the mind. And then it goes on to alter the brain. You see? If one is able to recognise what's happening, it is the first sign xxghixh of one's having been infected. One is first only aware that the language exists, and only later does one begin to comprehend its meaning. You and I must be in the first stages of the disease."

"But what of Thyxxolqu and Qxwthyyothl?"

"They are the xxtghzz names for death and disease. Xxguxxh familiar, we are on the edge of a great revelation one that dfgxx immaterialism in an

insane mind gzzzh...”

Pearce’s mouth hung open. His tongue bubbled with a mixture of saliva and blood. One side of his mouth then drooped fantastically, all the way to his jawline. His lower teeth and gums were visible, and had become brownish fragments set in rotting flesh. He put his hand up and rested it over the deformity, covering the awful sight, in an act of denial and self-consciousness. He tried to smoke from the other side of his mouth, and carry on as if nothing were amiss. Barclay was pained by the horror and absurdity of it.

Pearce got up from behind the desk, walked past Barclay, unlocked the door and opened it wide. He acted silently, and his eyes flashed towards the aperture, indicating that Barclay should leave.

Once Barclay had returned to the still-deserted ward, he took his clothes from the locker adjacent to the bed he had occupied, dressed, and made his way out of the hospital.

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It was not far from University College Hospital to the British Library, just a six minute walk along the Euston Road. Barclay tried hard to retain his composure as he set off for his destination, and clung to the idea that if he acted normally, then he might keep absolute terror at bay. He told himself it was vital that he consulted the article by De Quincey as he had planned.

All around him, however, the evidence of unearthly intrusion intensified. The adverts on the side of taxis and buses, the road signs, the foreign restaurants and the language that people spoke into their mobile phones was undiluted Thyxxolqus. It had completely replaced all other languages. He tried to avoid looking at the faces of people, but despite this, was conscious, out of the corner of his eye, that nine in ten of them suffered from deformed mouths.

He crossed the plaza outside the British Library, with its titanic statue modelled upon William Blake’s drawing of Newton, and entered through the heavy glass doors. He took the escalator up to the first floor Humanities reading rooms and went inside. The attendants at the desk, with mouths like caves, waved him through as usual, casting the merest glance at his pass and it was only as he returned it to his wallet that Barclay noticed that its lettering was no longer in English.

He collected the book, volume four of the *Collected Works of Thomas De Quincey* that he’d ordered, and took his place at one of the long rows of

the readers' desks. He looked left and right over the shoulders of the other readers between whom he sat and saw that the volumes they were consulting were written in Thyxxolqus. The language had spread into the books, transforming the texts, working its way like a virus through them all.

Barclay turned to the section of the De Quincey tome containing the article "Voices from the Grave" and read the following passage:

> Of the origins of language itself we can give no authoritative account, for speech predates writing and is lost in the period antediluvian. The academies are silent on the matter. And yet, is not language the most incredible aspect of humanity? Is it not the most suggestive of a great mystery? The written forms of antiquity do not suffer in comparison with modernity. They are in no wise inferior, even unto the earliest. They sprang, fully formed and with equal complexity, from the mysterious source whereof I assert. Words then, savour of the ineffable, and are proof that this cosmos is not easily explained. In this instance we, all benighted, continually regard what is miraculous as merely commonplace by virtue of its extreme familiarity.
>
> Language is the foundation of reality. Without it we would, like the beasts, exist wholly in a world of sensation. We should not be articulate, but cast adrift from the essence of creation, and unable to fathom its infinite depths. And in considering this matter, I cannot refrain from expressing a philosophic speculation that has arisen from out of gazing into that abyss. In what language do the dead converse? Are they freed from the multitude of tongues to which the living are shackled? Do they speak a language (let us call it Txxyollqus) whose meaning contains all possible meanings since their mode of being is outside space and time?

Barclay finished the sentence and closed the book. He left the reading room and went outside in order to gurgle and spit some water from one of the loo washbasins. His mouth was suddenly suffused with a coppery taste.

The sound of conversation amongst people milling around in the first floor area was in stark contrast to the silence of the reading room. He caught snatches of talk as people passed by and was astonished to find that

he could now understand every word perfectly. Moreover, they were conversing of matters fantastically complex and yet rendered lucid by the words they used. Barclay delighted in the awful play of meanings within meanings revealed. He pulled open the door to the men’s loo, turned a corner and came face to face with his reflection in a mirror above the washbasins. His mouth, unsurprisingly, was now quite as deformed as everyone else’s.

He had left the book by De Quincey at the desk and could not wait to return to it. He would sit all day in the library staring at it, if need be, until such time as its text was rendered into Thyxxolqus and yielded up even greater revelations.

The Black Mould

The mould first appeared in a crater on a dead world at the rim of the universe. This world, with a thin atmosphere and a surface that comets and meteors had battered for millions of years, spun in a void of sunless dark. Perhaps it had been one of those comet collisions that had brought the mould into existence, some unique arrangement of molecules mutated by radiation and lying dormant in the comet's slushy ice, something waiting to awaken and grow. The mould may have taken aeons to reach maturity and begin the process of reproduction. But when it did so, it grew rapidly and spread unchecked over the surface of that dead world, across its valleys and craters and mountains, across the equator and from pole to pole.

Once it had conquered that first world it became conscious, such was the size and complexity of the mould. The billions upon billions of simple cells formed a network that developed into a debased, gigantic hive-mind. The mould experienced a progressively horrible sequence of nightmares, a spiral of nameless dread without a centre. Its form of consciousness did not include the faculty of reason, but was a unique faculty; that of derangement. And its monstrous visions grew more intense as it spread, ever more profound in their ineffable malignity.

When it had conquered that dead and distant world, after everything lay under its ghastly black embrace, its nightmares demanded that it reach out across the void. And so trillions of spores were ejected into space.

In the end it brought ghastly, complete darkness to that unknown quarter of cosmic space, for it learnt how to suffocate stars.

It was terror, deepening without cessation, which bore aloft the spores of the mould on their voyage through interstellar space. Nightmarish ecstasy was the soul of the mould. It hungered and sought to consume the universe itself. Its dread was of a nameless horror, a stark madness beyond imagination; an ultimate horror that lurked somewhere in the universe but which it could not yet identify.

The mould had no means of recognising any other form of consciousness apart from its own. As it reproduced, the nameless dread that assailed it became exponentially complex. It existed only in order to experience the ultimate nightmare, the heart of horror, the petrifying vision that ends only in oblivion. It was in the attempt to destroy itself that the

mould consumed everything around it, and dimly it looked forward to a time when there was nothing left to consume, when the entire universe was laid waste, and it would wither and die for want of sustenance. It was one entity, eventually separated by the inconceivable vastness of the intergalactic void, and with each spore exhaled between worlds still a component of the whole. Its nightmares were communicated telepathically and were not slowed by the immensity of the cosmos. Dreams are swifter than light.

When the spores found a world, be it asteroid, moon or planet, they would drift to its surface like soft rain and begin the process of assimilating whatever was found there. Where once there was a mighty empire with towers that reached to the heavens, soon after there were only ruins, and the black mould consumed the creatures of that world. Only husks remained as evidence that they had ever existed at all.

The ravages of the mould increased as it multiplied. As immeasurable time passed, countless galaxies bore the evidence of its all-conquering reign. Where there had been a multitude of worlds of differing aspects, of arid yellow deserts, of misty and scarred blue ice, of airless grey dust, now all were identical. All were blackened, their surfaces entirely smothered by the mould: canyons and mountains, plateaux and craters, cities and forests, ice and sand, even oceans (choked by a miasmal slime that conquered all incalculable depths). The mould flourished everywhere and anywhere. It mattered not if its habitat were a world of liquid methane or water, or a world roasting close to a star, or a world far flung out in space and frozen at absolute zero.

Astronomers on distant worlds looked on with dread at the development. Those that perceived it not, perished all the same. Multiform were the species of the universe, following different paths of evolution and modes of thought, though none were as the mould. But all those that looked outward at the universe felt wonder and terror, whether they were taloned crustaceans in a fungous jungle, cognisant machines of incredible technological complexity, or peace-loving sea mammals that gazed with dark eyes at the stars above the waters of an alien world. All knew the end was near and their kind would, ere centuries had passed, be consumed and then participate in the cosmic corruption of the mould.

One insignificant species amongst the many millions in the universe succumbed to the mould after vain attempts to resist its advance. This

species, a nearly hairless race of anthropoids, habited the third planet orbiting an undistinguished star. The mould consumed the outer gas giants and the satellites of this solar system one by one. The simians watched with mounting terror as the spores drew inexorably nearer, moving unaccountably against the solar wind and turning the red desert planet in fourth orbit as black as the other outer worlds.

By the time the mould had reached the third planet's only satellite the hairless apes were in turmoil. Their civilisation was on the brink of anarchy and they were close to destroying themselves. The light cast by the world's moon at night was no longer white but a deathly grey, shading to black, and becoming dim. It bore the same affliction that had reigned throughout all those galactic regions the mould had conquered. There were morbid ape poets that wrote verses to the contagion and seemed to welcome the insidious nightmares that foretold complete assimilation. But other apes, vainglorious followers of science, who fired rockets into the heavens, watched the explosions that took place on their moon with desperate hope. The satellite bore a hellish aspect, utterly unfamiliar to them. The mould had rendered it terrifying: like decay in a corpse.

And when the spores finally filtered down onto their own world, there were many more explosions and scenes of horror amongst the hairless apes as they turned on themselves, blaming each other for the failure to resist what was, after all, inevitable.

And it was not long before the streets of their cities were thick with the mould, not long before black slime ran in the water, not long before the anthropoids found the first patches of black ichors on their skins. And then the endless dreams came, just before the mould completely consumed the helpless simians.

As soon as the star of that solar system was overrun and suffocated, the spores progressed onwards, their numbers always swelled by the exhalations of the solar systems consumed before. Across the unknown stellar gulfs spread the contagion, never once halted in its expansion. There were other civilisations that tried to resist its advance, but all perished in the end. The most advanced ones, who had cunning and the available means, elected to flee before the mould's arrival. But even these were caught up with and consumed in the end. After aeons, all those that fled found that there was no longer anywhere left to hide.

The mould and its spores became omnipresent throughout the universe. The gas clouds and the gulfs of space were choked with spores. And yet the mould had not achieved its goal. Although the entire universe had been laid waste, and neither life nor thought existed, except for the mould and its exponential nameless dread, still it had not achieved the final petrifying vision that could terrify it into self-extinction.

And so the spores poured into those stars that had reached the final point of collapse, into the black holes scattered throughout the cosmos. The mould appeared in other universes and in every epoch across those other dimensions. It spread and adapted as voraciously as it had ever done, unchecked and irresistible, from the beginning until the end of all existence.

But the ultimate, petrifying vision could still not be glimpsed and the mould, now the supreme conqueror, dreamed on and on in its hideous majesty; doomed to re-experience its nameless dread forever; for it was the mould itself that was the ultimate horror and of itself it had never dreamed.

It groped futilely, as one in darkness gropes for the light, backwards and forwards throughout all space and time, until all that had been, and all that was to be, fell under its dominion. And there was to be no release from the nightmare.

Xapalpa

In order to reach the Mexican town of Xapalpa, you have to take a road that climbs upwards through the mountains. It is a tortuous road, one which winds like a serpent across the arid landscape, and which finally attains the level of the plateau and the mass of buildings clustered around the Xapalpa river. The terrain is famous for its huge volcanic rocks called the Piedrotas. They are located to the northwest of the town and jut out fantastically from the earth, in a multitude of bewildering geological formations. Such is their extreme antiquity, they have been worn down in places by centuries of wind and rain. From Xapalpa, one can see the Colima volcano to the south, the most active of all volcanoes in Mexico, as it almost continually puffs out sulphur smoke from its crater. One senses that it is a region of cosmic antiquity, and that man is no more significant here than any other of the insects that crawl in the dust.

Frank Mason tried not to let the impressive scenery all around distract him from the road ahead as he drove his black Cherokee Jeep towards Xapalpa. If he let his attention wander there seemed a good chance he'd wind up hurtling his vehicle into the scrubland below. He was in his early sixties, with a large paunch, a white moustache, and sun-reddened skin that never quite retained a tan. Since taking retirement from a Chicago bank four months ago he'd decided to retire to Mexico where his pension money would go further. His wife had died of a tumour on the brain when he was fifty-eight, he had no other family to speak of, and he liked to look at dark-skinned girls as he drank his daily quota of beer.

He'd retired to the colonial town of San Miguel de Allende, but it had been overrun by other retired gringos, and, noticing a sense of resentment creeping into the service provided by the indigenous inhabitants (or so he suspected; paranoia had long been one of his defining traits), he thought he might scout around for another town in which to live; one more noticeably eager and grateful for American spending power. He'd taken Spanish classes after first arriving in San Miguel, and his grasp of the language had improved considerably. However, he may have been better off had he remained mostly monolingual, like so many other gringos there. Much of the time he was alone in cantinas and restaurants, and he always had an ear

cocked for slighting references to his nationality, eavesdropping on conversations, unconsciously seeking to confirm his own prejudices.

He also disliked the other Americans who had come down south. He tried to avoid them as best he could. They were continually seeking free financial advice from him, often under the guise of friendship. Moreover, they reminded him of his clients from the bank in Chicago and he had no wish to be reminded of the past at all. New arrivals at San Miguel were the worst offenders, and there were more and more of them as the months went on.

Mason's Jeep passed by the woods overlooking Xapalpa. The greenery was dotted with log cabins that housed tourists. It was more expensive to stay up in the woods than to stay in the centre of Xapalpa, and only worth the extra expense if one's stay consisted of quad-bike driving, horse riding, paragliding, or some other sporting activity liable to end in a broken neck.

He parked just outside the main square, on Avenida Hidalgo, which was dominated by the church of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Constructed from local red brick in 1970, its single tower with its white cupola blended in harmoniously with the rest of the village. All of the little houses had whitewashed fronts, red-shuttered windows, and red-tiled roofs that sloped towards narrow cobbled streets. Many of the pavements were elevated above the level of the road, and small flights of steps at regular intervals assisted pedestrians making their way up and down the winding hills upon which Xapalpa had been constructed. During the day the sun was fierce, but at night, such was its altitude, the temperature dropped markedly and many houses were equipped with fireplaces and chimneys. Poor Indio children, dressed in bright garb, would ply their trade selling bundles of kindling in the streets, or by approaching people sitting in the shade of the wooden loggias surrounding the garden in the town centre.

The sun was going down by the time Mason had crossed the square, his long shadow trailing behind him, and he entered the little cantina on Avenida Obregon. It was deserted except for the owner, who was polishing the glasses with his apron. Mason sat down at the table of the three inside closest to the doorway, and took in his surroundings.

The outside of the bar counter was decorated with old wooden rifles and military sabres, and there were a number of photographs of revolutionary heroes hanging on the surrounding walls. Emiliano Zapata

stared down sternly in an eternally frozen black and white moment. A couple of lamps, whose electric bulbs were housed in nicotine yellow glass, hung from the deep blue ceiling.

Finally the owner made his way over from behind the counter to Mason's table. He had brought no menu, and so Mason anticipated that he was expected to know what he wanted to drink sight unseen. He ordered a beer, one that was dark rather than clear, and after the owner had brought the icy cold bottle over to him, he took a swig from it and settled back into his chair. The old man had been indifferent towards Mason, scarcely paying him any attention at all, and had not even bothered to greet him with a friendly "*buenas tardes*". However, some ten minutes later, when another customer entered, one of the locals, he was effusive with his welcome. Fraternity was something money could not buy. The new arrival stood at the counter for a while, and Mason was conscious of the fact that, all the time whilst he was chatting with the owner, the man was regarding Mason from the corner of his eye.

Mason was not sure whether he was being sized up as a possible target for free drinks, or whether the stranger was just naturally curious, or wary, about the gringo who had decided to drink in this particular watering hole. It was very strange, Mason thought, the way that the Mexicans could sniff out a gringo even before he'd opened his mouth. It wasn't just a matter of clothing or skin colour. There were many pale-skinned folk in Mexico (guerritos or blondies, they were called) and all the clothes Mason owned now had been purchased here.

His mind apparently made up, the stranger came over to Mason's table, uttered a greeting, and then sat down, without asking permission to do so. Evidently he felt that Mason was a guest at the table, and indeed, within the cantina itself.

"Here on vacation, eh my friend?" he said, removing the tall straw hat with a frayed brim from his head. His hair was jet-black and oiled. Despite his being nearly the same advanced age as Mason, the colour seemed natural. His creased fingers played around the half-empty glass of ice mixed with Chivas whiskey he'd placed on the table in front of him.

Mason responded in fluent Spanish, and said no, he lived in Mexico, and was looking at a number of small towns in the State of Jalisco with a view to finding somewhere more affordable and to his taste than where he was living at present.

The stranger grinned. He continued to speak in English, but whether as a courtesy to Mason or in deliberate disregard for the American's command of Spanish, it was not possible to tell. He introduced himself as Paco Maldonado, offered a "*salud*, friend" and tapped his rapidly emptying glass against Mason's bottle of beer. The American was suddenly conscious of the fact that, although they were approximately the same age, the difference in their physical conditions was very marked. Mason was a flabby, unfit man who had spent his whole life working behind a desk or else driving a car from one place to another. Maldonado, conversely, had a deep leathery tan gained from decades of outdoor work. His body was sinewy and muscular, and his calloused hands and chipped fingernails told of stresses greater than meeting deadlines and tapping away at a keyboard.

"There is house, cheap, I think you like," Maldonado said, "very close from here. It is good, but not I think if you easily have fear. A gringo, like you, stayed there once. Now there is no-one."

Twilight in Mexico does not last long. The sun disappears quickly and night arrives within a few minutes, as if the darkness is impatient to take hold, having been kept waiting for too long by the day. Mason glanced away from Maldonado's fixed gaze and looked beyond the doorway to the now dark street outside.

"The house, friend, is—how you say—'haunted', but I think you are not a man who believes in phantoms, no? You see no reason to fear the dead."

"You mean ghosts? I don't think so," Mason replied.

"I will tell you about the story. And then, perhaps, when we have drunk more, you will permit me to show the place to you."

The two men ordered more drinks, tapped glasses, and then Maldonado began to tell the tale of the other gringo and his stay at La Casa de Fuente on Avenida Mondragon, which is now rendered hereafter.

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It was during the Christmas festivities of 1962 that Hank Barron arrived in Xapalpa. The town was festooned with multi-coloured paper decorations, and the numerous little roadside altars to the Virgin, Our Lady of Guadalupe, were surrounded with candles. Electric lights, then still a novelty outside of the big cities, crisscrossed the narrow cobbled streets, from one red-tiled roof to another. The red brick church dedicated to Our Lady had not yet been built, and the centre of worship in the main square at

that time was the ancient, squat temple of San Antonio. Hanging from the eaves of the wooden loggias in the main square, and from many other eaves throughout the whole of Xapalpa, were the piñatas.

Piñatas are part of Christmas or birthday celebrations in many Spanish-speaking countries. Often a whole street's residents will arrange a time when the children can enjoy this tradition. A piñata is traditionally a clay orb about the size of a large watermelon, which is wrapped in silver foil. Radiating from the orb are five or more cones, so that it resembles a star, and hanging at the tip of each are paper streamers. Inside the piñata there are fruits, candies or little gifts. During the celebration it is raised up into the air on a rope and the children try to strike it with a heavy stick as it dangles around, being moved higher or lower by the person holding the rope to which it is tethered. Those who are chosen to strike the piñata are often handicapped with a blindfold. As soon as it is broken open the game ceases and the children retrieve the gifts from within.

It may seem to be a needless digression to have so detailed these piñatas, but as you will see, they played an important part in what happened to Hank Barron when he took up occupancy of the house he had rented for two weeks on Avenida Mondragon.

There are those who say that Barron himself arrived with the fever, but others maintain that the house, or the wind, brought it on. He was a young man, a student of Mexican anthropology, and had been researching at the University of Guadalajara for three months prior to his arrival in Xapalpa. Colleagues at the university had recommended the village as an excellent place to relax over the Christmas festivities, and had advised him of its nearby attractions, such as the Piedrotas, the waterfalls, and the expanse of woods surrounding the town. What Barron had not suspected was that they had made these recommendations since they were concerned about his health, for it had been obvious to them that Barron was close to nervous exhaustion through overwork. He scarcely ever socialised with his fellow students, and, as the only American on the campus, found himself the target of mostly good-natured banter about being "*estudiante el gringo*". He possessed the American mania for competitiveness, which is in direct contrast to the Mexican ethos that one lives in order to enjoy living.

Barron came across the travel bureau in a little side street off La Paz in Guadalajara. There was a sign in the dusty window advertising a cheap rate for a fourteen-day "get away from it all" break in beautiful Xapalpa. He

learned from the owner that the bureau was shortly to close down its business for good, which was why he was able to offer a two weeks stay in Xapalpa at such a low price. The house he would rent, admittedly, had not been occupied for a few years, but it had a supply of running water as well as a pump, and one scarcely had any need of such modern amenities as an electrical supply when a fireplace, well stocked with logs, was already in place. Due to Xapalpa's altitude, high in the mountains, the nights could be very windy and chilly, and the bureau owner thoughtfully suggested that Barron should pack some warm clothes for the trip. Towards the end of their conversation, the bureau owner suddenly offered Barron an even cheaper offer, this time in an entirely different village altogether, and actually seemed reluctant to hand over the keys and receipt for the Xapalpa trip. But finally he did so. Barron suspected that the owner might have realised he'd undersold the package, and now wished to renege on the deal.

And so a few weeks later it transpired that Barron found himself on board the daily bus from Guadalajara to Xapalpa, which crawled past a series of towns in a meandering dirt-track route that took four hours to reach its destination. It was not a comfortable trip. The bus was packed, swelteringly hot, and baggage spilled from the overhead racks whenever it made a sharp turn. A red wasp, huge, and with hind legs like a cricket, was trapped inside the vehicle. It was a source of annoyance and fear until someone managed to shepherd it out of an open window. Barron felt painfully conspicuous. It was obvious he was a foreigner, and he was treated as an object of ill-disguised curiosity. The other passengers were all poor and mostly Indios with only one or two mestizos. Barron alone carried no homemade piñata as part of his luggage.

By the time the bus arrived at Xapalpa, Barron was nearly exhausted. He had brought no water for the journey and his lips and throat were painfully dry. He felt that he had a fever coming on. The rest of the passengers had disembarked before he finally hauled his baggage (two battered valises) from the overhead rack. On the other side of the dirt track where the bus had parked there was a little stall that sold tacos, and it also had a selection of sodas kept in a dirty bucket of iced water. Barron bought one for a half peso, chugged it down his arid throat, and then asked directions to Avenida Mondragon.

"There is no hotel on Avenida Mondragon," was what he received by way of a reply.

“I have rented La Casa De Fuente. I am staying there,” Barron said.

The taco vendor looked dubious. He seemed to regard this piece of information as tainted at the source. But he gave Barron the directions to Avenida Mondragon, advising him that there were better places for a tourist to stay, especially during a holy festival.

As he made his way up the hill towards the centre of town, dusk had fallen, and he admired the Christmas decorations that the folk of Xapalpa had created. He particularly liked the electric lights that crisscrossed the streets. The piñatas, hanging from eaves, he liked less. They bothered him in an irrational fashion. He was somehow reminded of huge deformed starfishes, row after row of them, their shapes indistinct in the gloom, their outlines blended by shadows.

He found Avenida Mondragon easily enough, and checked his pocket for the keys that he had been given by the owner of the travel bureau. He was relieved to find that there were still there, for he had not thought of them until now. The street was not very long and he found La Casa De Fuente about halfway down its gently curving slope. At first he thought he had the wrong address. The sign on the gate outside was clear enough though, so there could seem to be no chance of a mistake.

La Casa De Fuente was in a state of considerable neglect. Beyond the trellised gate its courtyard was overgrown with bushes and weeds that had been left to run riot. They had surged up from between the flagstones, and had taken hold of the courtyard’s chief architectural feature, which had given the house its name. It was a stone fountain, some six feet high. It stood in front of the sheltered patio and had been designed with two levels, so the water would cascade from the upper to the lower, wider, basin level. The designer had thought to incorporate a floral design to the stonework, but voracious lichens had distorted and ravaged whatever beauty it may have originally possessed.

Barron dreaded to think what the interior of La Casa De Fuente might be like, given the outward neglect of the building. Its tiled roof sagged noticeably, and the wide front window bore concentric cracks like a bedewed cobweb. He felt that he had been cheated by the travel bureau. Little wonder that the business was on the verge of closing down, if this was the type of service it provided.

He was now certain that he had a fever. When he wiped his forehead it was hot, prickly and dry. Since the sun had set, Barron had noticed how

chilly it had become, and recalled the warning he had been given about how cold nights were at this altitude during this time of the year. He shivered, buttoned up the corduroy jacket he wore and hoped it would be warmer inside.

After he'd managed to turn the reluctant lock on the gate, picked his way through the undergrowth of the courtyard, and got inside the half-stuck front door, he found that the place was at least liveable in. It was a single storey bungalow house, with a fireplace at the back, cooking facilities to the left, and a bed in the other corner. Whitish grey dustsheets shrouded the furniture. Barron removed them, and stowed them away under the bed, and found he had the use of a writing bureau and chair, a dinner table and two stools. In a recessed alcove next to the fireplace there was a washbasin, as well as a standalone tin bathtub that had to be filled with water from a pump.

Barron unpacked his two valises, one of which was full of his research books, and was surprised to find that he had no sense of hunger (the fever, he supposed, having deadened it) and crawled into the musty bed, hoping that tomorrow's bright morning sunshine would bring with it an improvement in his health.

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There was to be no bright morning sunshine. When Barron awoke the following day, his mouth encrusted with dried saliva, and his stomach complaining at the lack of food he'd taken, it was to the rhythm of heavy rain drumming against the tiled roof and wind rattling the window frame. Only a feeble, grey half-light was visible through the large window. His thirst was like a torment, and he rolled out of bed towards the water pump in the alcove. He suspected that it might draw from a well and thus be fresh and drinkable. He had no real way of knowing but would take the chance this once. He could see no other reason for its being there, since the bungalow house had a separate supply of running water from the mains.

Once he had drunk from the pump and quenched his thirst, he washed away the sheen of fever sweat from his brow, and then felt more able to engage with his situation. His fever had somewhat abated, but he knew he should consult a doctor. Unfortunately, he was not sure that he had enough money to do so. It could be that the fever was one of short-lived duration, and would exhaust itself after only a few days. After all, he was young and relatively fit, and he had no reason to believe the malaise was of a serious

nature. He decided to venture out into Xapalpa and find something to eat for breakfast, and reassess his options thereafter. He had felt no nausea, only a lack of appetite. Perhaps with food in his stomach, his own natural defences would come to the fore and he would be strengthened against the onset of the fever.

Barron dressed, putting on a coat and a wide-brimmed hat to protect against the rain outside.

There were few people on the streets, just a few Indios wrapped up in ponchos and wearing pointed straw hats, driving small carts pulled by donkeys. The rain had dampened down the dusty roads, and dirty rivulets ran beneath the elevated pavements and their series of worn steps. The wind was fierce, gusting through the streets as if angry at its enforced confinement. Many shops had their shutters closed, and so Barron made his way to the central plaza, which was the one place he felt certain he could obtain a meal. The piñatas lined the way, and the rain had soaked them through, so that they were wet and dripping, their papery limbs flopping in the wind, and looking even more like the rotten starfish thrown up from watery depths that Barron had fancifully imagined them to be.

He found a restaurant, Los Companeros, hidden away at the back of the plaza, and he ate a breakfast of refrijoles and huevos con chorizo that was served by an ancient mestizo dressed all in black, save for the splash of his white shirt. Barron consumed his meal inside, but then took hot coffee on a sheltered balcony overlooking the main square. He watched the dark grey clouds scudding across the high mountains all around, hissing as they unburdened themselves of rain on the open spaces of Xapalpa. It seemed as if the sky had come down to the village and was blasting it with its cold watery breath.

On the way back from the restaurant, from which he had also taken away a couple of tortas filled with ham, cheese and jalapenos, so that he would not have to venture out for a meal later in the day, he got lost.

Somehow, he had been deceived by the layout of Xapalpa, and taken the wrong exit from a deserted, cryptic plaza of claustrophobic dimensions. He found himself on a back road, named Quintero, that skirted the village and which took him alongside the huge white entrance to the town cemetery. It was an imposing gateway, with four pillars supporting an Italianate lintel with carved twin wings and a sacred heart bas-relief.

Barron peered in through the closed and padlocked gates, sheltering for a time from the elements. He saw several decayed tombs surrounded by railings and a host of wooden crosses tottering at acute angles. Wreaths of brown flowers littered the area, looking as if they had grown from the dirty soil itself, rather than simply having been left by mourners to die there. He seemed to recall a folk legend about this place that he had come across in one of his anthropological textbooks, and he resolved to look it up later that evening. Although the memory was vague, he recalled that it had an unusually fanciful and sinister cast, but it had been of little significance to him at the time. He had not then known that he would be visiting Xapalpa, and it was nothing more than another village name and simply one superstitious Mexican legend amongst a great multitude. As he struggled to recall which of the textbooks contained the reference, Barron caught sight of something the size of a large cat moving amidst the undergrowth of weeds between two tombs. The thing was curiously shapeless, and a mottled grey colour. Perhaps it was just Barron's fever playing tricks, but he could have sworn the thing had been crawling with more than four limbs.

When he got back to the bungalow house, he was soaked through. The brim of his hat drooped with the weight of the rainwater it had absorbed. His clothes clung to his skin with clammy dampness, and he shivered violently as he removed them from his body. Naturally, his fever had got worse. He felt dizzy as he struggled to get a blaze going in the fireplace, and he fumbled with the matches, dropping several of them between the logs of wood. The logs had been treated with a tarry substance, doubtless to aid their combustion, but they had lain for so long in the fireplace, becoming covered with a layer of dust, that they proved impossible to light. He thought of the Indio children who sold kindling in the plaza and cursed himself for not buying one of their bundles.

He dozed for a while on the bed, wrapping the musty-smelling blankets around his naked body, and drifted in and out of consciousness. He was troubled by strange dreams, but could not grasp their meaning, nor recall the events that had transpired within them. His impression was that he had been dreaming not of scenes, but rather of atmospheres, and in particular, was haunted by a vague sensation of horrible wonder and of falling into an immeasurable gulf whose darkness pressed down upon him.

When the worst of the fever had abated, and Barron felt that he was thinking coherently once more, it was already evening, and the light had

been exhausted. He tried to consume one of the tortas that he had bought earlier in the day, but his appetite was not up to the task. He left the roll of bread and its contents half-eaten, and washed down what little he had eaten with some water from the pump. He moved around the room wrapped in the blankets, for they were warmer than any of the few clothes he had brought with him.

He glanced over the books of folklore and anthropology that he had piled upon the table, remembering that he wished to track down the reference he had tried to recall during his curious experience outside the gateway of the cemetery. The indexes of the volumes yielded several entries for “Xapalpa”, and it was in the ninth book he examined that he found that for which he was searching.

It was an article written in 1950, by the Chairman of the department of anthropology at Mexico City College, one Robert H. Barlow, and was entitled “Strange Worship: the Head Cult of Xapalpa”.

The following passage from the article was what disturbed Barron most:

> With cremation being taboo, and since the head was considered the source of the demon-possession, it was considered necessary to bury this part separately. After death, therefore, such corpses were decapitated and the head placed in a box some distance from the coffin containing the torso and limbs. The torso was invariably placed chest down, and a long iron stake driven through its back, fixing it in place. This was to prevent the body from clawing its way up to the surface and then going about the cemetery in search of its head, which still had control over it.
>
> However, there grew up a strange cult of worship for these supposed demon-possessed heads, who were reputed to be able to tell of the future when paid certain blood tributes. The necromantic practice was stamped out in the 1920s, since the despoiling of skulls from Xapalpa cemetery had achieved widespread notoriety, and was a source of embarrassment to the local authorities.

He had found what he was looking for, and wished he hadn’t. Barron decided that he had spent enough time in Xapalpa, and that he would leave as soon as it was possible. He had thought to bring along with him the bus timetable, and was frustrated to discover that the next service back to Guadalajara did not leave until the morning after next, since it was the middle of the Christmas period, and the frequency was reduced. He regretted the fact that he had wasted money on renting La Casa De Fuente for many more days than he would use it, but he felt that his fever was connected, in some nebulous way, with his occupancy.

Barron slept more easily that night. His fever abated slightly, as if confirming that he had made the right decision.

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The following day could not have been a greater contrast with the one before. The wind and rain had disappeared, and hot sunshine, brilliant in its intensity, took their place. Xapalpa was transformed into a magic town that had reached up into the pure blue sky.

Barron wandered through the narrow dusty streets for hours in the sun, glad to have the opportunity to be outside and away from the decayed confines of La Casa De Fuente. He sat on benches when he tired, drawing curious looks from passers-by, for in his expression was a strange co-mixture of dread and vacancy brought on by his continued delirium. He would stare up at the naked sun, as if trying to blind himself. He seemed to be desirous of drawing some portion of its energy into his enervated frame, and thereby driving out the shadows within.

It was in the plaza of claustrophobic dimensions that he came across the children playing the game. They formed a circle around a piñata hoisted high up by a rope. The ones who took turns at hitting the star-shaped object were blindfolded. But this piñata was not brightly coloured. It was a mottled grey, and stinking of decomposition. Its cone limbs flapped desperately in the air. Barron watched with fascination as child after child battered the thing, squealing with excitement, and cheering as it was beaten into a state of ruin. Finally, one of them struck a blow that cracked open the core, the rope was released, and the piñata fell onto the dusty street below. They descended upon it as if ravenous with hunger, and from amidst the scrum, a single boy emerged carrying the prize. It was a soil-blackened human skull with a hole in the centre of its cranium.

Barron never returned to La Casa De Fuente. After dark, and having spent all of the afternoon under the burning sun, he was last seen in a cantina on Obregon, where he drank a great deal of mezcal. He babbled deliriously about piñatas, of the secret of the cemetery on Quintero, and of the old cult. In short, his talk was about everything of which one does not speak in Xapalpa. When his disappearance was investigated, the local police were satisfied that what the locals said was correct; he had drunk too much mezcal on top of a near-lethal dose of sunstroke. He had said he wished to leave Xapalpa, and had probably wandered off alone that night in his delirium, and got lost in the vast expanses of uncharted woods that cover the mountains all around the town.

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Mason finished his beer. He did not like the story and he did not like the grin on the face of Paco Maldonado.

“I don’t believe a word of it,” Mason said, in Spanish, “and I don’t scare easily.”

The owner of the cantina had come out from behind the counter. He had taken down and was holding one of the old rifles that decorated the walls. He began polishing the barrel with a rag.

Maldonado sipped nonchalantly at his tumbler of ice and Chivas whiskey.

Mason felt cold sweat on his brow. He could not tell whether it was a result of the fear he denied feeling or of a fever coming on.

Glickman the Bibliophile

For weeks the nation had been suffering from an epidemic of destruction at libraries, bookshops and publishers. Those persons who had been caught and charged with the crimes claimed afterwards to have no knowledge of their actions and acted as if in a trance. Any random individual could, it was claimed, enter this trance-state and begin to destroy books using whatever means they had at their disposal.

The action was apparently motiveless, unplanned and the consequence of a spontaneous, temporary mania. Theories concerning the possible origin of the behaviour were legion but none of them seemed to explain all of the facts. Some proposed that a new chemical had been used in book-production that altered the mental state of those in its vicinity, but this did not account for the destruction of antiquarian bookshops. Another theory advanced concerned an airborne germ released by a foreign power but this seemed unlikely, as reports came in of the same phenomenon striking across the world with no country being immune. One theory that was given credence for a time advanced the idea that some form of evolution had taken place in that area of the human brain concerned with linguistic recognition. It was believed that instead of recognition, this area of the brain now generated an intolerable fear of written signifiers, leading to acts of violence and memory-loss when the sufferer came into contact with text. But this was discredited after the corpses of those persons who perished accidentally in acts of book destruction were examined. Their brains showed no signs of abnormal development or damage. None of the theories advanced could be held with certainty.

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Henry Glickman was on his way to a meeting with his new publishers, the Nemesis Press. The company that had issued his last collection of stories had recently gone into liquidation and another author who had told Glickman that their remuneration was extremely generous had recommended these new publishers to him. He was not a commercially successful author and had no agent, merely indulging in post-retirement fantasies of authorial fame.

He was in his mid-sixties, thin, with a pinched, aquiline face and a mane of grey hair. Books had been his passion for as long as he could

remember and his personal library consisted of well over two thousand volumes. His books were almost his very life, the casements that had opened up magical vistas.

Glickman had never married and had long-since settled into a secluded bachelor mode. Quite honestly, women were not able to compete with the real love of his life. What money he earned he spent almost entirely on books and he had no desire to give up the pursuit of them for the pursuit of companionship. It seemed a logical step for him to begin writing some books of his own. He had the manuscript of his second collection in his briefcase.

After a time Glickman reached his destination. He parked in front of the steps leading up to the main entrance of the building. It was a huge white Art Deco structure with flaking paint and decrepit pilasters. The windows were layered with dust. On a board next to the entrance were marked the names of the companies located there and Glickman saw that the Nemesis Press now occupied the entire building. The names of the previous companies had been covered over with tape. Such expansion seemed to bode well for the financial security of the business.

The interior was a mass of activity. It seemed that attempts were being made to complete cataloguing of their stock but these were evidently well behind schedule. Passing along a corridor Glickman found himself in a vast warehouse. Books lay scattered and piled up in crates on the bare floorboards, being checked by clerks in shirtsleeves. They were too intent upon their work to pay any attention to Glickman as he mingled with them.

Glickman wandered around for a brief time, along the aisles, checking the stock more carefully. He was somewhat surprised to discover that the books here were not only Nemesis Press publications, but came from a wide variety of sources.

The editorial offices of the company were located on the third floor of the building and Glickman had to make his way up a tiled stairwell to reach them. He passed more clerks, all carrying piles of books up and down the steps. These men were all pallid and zombie-like as if they had long withdrawn from the world into the refuge of their duties.

Upon arrival at the third floor, Glickman found the editorial offices at the end of a half-lit corridor. He was shown into an adjacent interview room by one of the staff.

After he had waited a few moments a middle-aged and quite small man with an uncommonly large head and piercing green eyes entered the room. He was almost bald, with his white hair shaved close to the scalp. There was an air of quiet fatalism about him.

“My name is Janus Yaanek. I am the Chief Editor of Nemesis Press,” he said, “and you must be Mr Glickman.”

“I am. It’s good to meet you at last. I’ve brought the manuscript with me in which you expressed interest,” Glickman took an envelope from his briefcase containing a 200-page document; “it’s a collection of weird horror tales called *The Rotting Brain and Other Stories.*”

“I shall be sure to give it my full attention. But first let me show you around our little empire. We take such pride in our activities that we subject all our authors to the grand tour.”

“Of course,” Glickman replied.

The two men left the interview room and, with Yaanek leading the way, passed along the corridor and through a series of locked doors and gloomy and interminable back-and-forth stairways, worthy of Escher, until they came to a vast chamber which, in turn, could have sprung from a nightmare of a Piranesi. It was a gigantic operations centre located deep inside the building.

There were hundreds of people working in the chamber. They all seemed to share that pallid, withdrawn aspect he had noted amongst the other employees, and shuffled reports and examined the huge piles of books that lay on their desks. Some would consume the pages of the books, and then vomit the regurgitated pulp into huge bins. Every few minutes a servitor would wheel these bins away, presumably to another part of the building.

The chamber was filled with banks of decayed computer terminals. They were machines the likes of which Glickman had not previously seen or even imagined might exist: half-mechanical, half-organic structures that seemed to operate on a basis of mutual degeneracy. The clerks were wholly absorbed in their tasks. In fact, as he drew closer, Glickman very clearly saw that their limbs seemed to have moulded with the flesh-like apparatus of the keyboards. One could not determine where one began and the other ended. It was only when total exhaustion overcame one of the operatives that he was taken away to recuperate, his limbs disengaging from the apparatus like melting plastic.

And in their beady, black, unblinking eyes were reflected the hundreds of screens displaying binary code, scrolling across and downwards at a fantastic rate. The typists seemed to be trying to transmit information that would lurk *behind* the endless sequence of zeroes and ones, like thoughts behind words.

"My hackers…" said Yaanek, as he motioned his aides to restrain the horrified and staggered Glickman, "have also been extremely successful in eradicating knowledge. We cannot have text existing in cyberspace, eluding oblivion. Millions of our agents around the world, mimic their acts of annihilation. Of course physical books and manuscripts such as your own we may destroy more easily."

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Afterwards Glickman was taken down to the basement where he was imprisoned in a small room that served as a cell. It was only seven square feet across with a folding bed and a bucket in one corner and seemed to have formerly been a storage room. It had no windows and a lightbulb provided the only illumination, being screwed into a socket on the wooden-slatted walls. He paced the cell for a time and then sat down on the bed. There was nothing to do except await whatever fate the Nemesis Press had planned for him.

Some hours later, though Glickman had no way of measuring time, two nameless clerks entered the cell. They said nothing to him, but simply leant back on the wall facing Glickman and stared at him intensely without blinking. A horrible smile played about both their faces.

Glickman turned away from them. After a few minutes he began to discover that his thoughts were being invaded. The fear he felt was evaporating and instead he experienced a sensation not unlike madness. Voices were speaking inside his head. Although initially this consisted of a dialogue with the invaders it was not long before the alien voices drowned out his attempts to resist them. The source of this intrusion was undoubtedly the clerks who were using some morbid form of telepathy.

Glickman's brain reeled with the waves of thought that were directed at him. He learnt of the falsity of literature and, at first to avoid the pain of resistance but later with dawning enlightenment, shared in this vision. Glickman, who had made the dissemination of books his passion, now understood the necessity of their destruction. Books were utterly worthless. He understood that no one ever wrote without the result being warped by

his or her own prejudices and ego. Ninety-nine per cent of books sat on shelves and in bookcases and were unread, unnoticed and untouched. For the vast majority of people, books were simply ornaments to a room, advertising their owners' intellectual vanity. One in a million books was ever re-read and the so-called classics were mostly dipped into and unadmittedly discarded or force-read. Not though by academics, who canonised these "classics" and lived like parasites on the obscurity they generated. The masses were as vile in their own way. They read drivel churned out by illiterates. These illiterate authors had allowed themselves to become "product". And then there was the worst of all: books that instructed us on how to live, when to turn to such books was a symptom of the disease, not its cure.

The Nemesis Press was the latest experiment of the Bibliophobos Collective.

Had the dying Franz Kafka known of the existence of the Collective that author certainly would have alerted them to his writings and not have entrusted the obliteration of his novels and stories to the unwilling Max Brod. The activities of these secret book-exterminators were not confined to the destruction of published works. They were invariably ready to obliterate manuscripts of all types that came into their possession willingly or unwillingly. The merits of a writer's work were of no interest to them and they viewed the existence of literary work as a proliferation of vermin, being only too willing to act as pest controllers in this regard. All texts were without a centre of meaning. Their interpretation rested with the reader, not the author. There could be no agreed purpose to a text. All was chaos. The text was an autonomous entity. In short, without the reader the text did not even exist save as a cipher.

The organisation was of extremely ancient origin and related the legend of their descent from a papyrus-burning sect in ancient Khem. There were even outrageous hints that the destruction of the library at Alexandria had been their work: the consequence of an eager operative taking no chances after failing to locate a palimpsest he had sought within its walls. Certainly there were some parallels with freemasonry, though the book-exterminators had no leanings of an altruistic nature.

The creed: All books are exits from life. Books must be destroyed.

The Collective was putting tenets into action that few dared even to consider. Unlike the book-burning Nazis or the censorious communists, it

was not selective. It did not destroy because it thought works corrupt or dangerous. It destroyed works because it believed none had meaning or significance, because words only mean other words and chase each other, in a linguistic game of tag, to a void. The Collective's operatives were terrorists, empty visionaries, who, in a perverse fashion, could be said to have collaborated with an author, even if only through destruction. And in fact they found that the most effective operatives were authors who had been turned to their cause: poachers turned gamekeepers.

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By the time the clerks left the cell Glickman's mind was in chaos. To him had been vouchsafed the mission of the Bibliophobos Collective, but it required several more sessions of telepathic indoctrination before he came close to finally embracing their cause. Any resistance to the brainwashing drove him closer to total mental collapse.

Yaanek personally visited Glickman in his cell. The Magister of the Collective sat at the edge of the bed and advised him to submit to the indoctrination. His fate, he told him, was sealed anyway. The last shreds of resistance in Glickman rose to the surface when he thought back over the long years of collecting, of his former career at the British Library; at the boundless pleasure reading of literature and the sciences had brought him. But he knew that an appeal on these grounds would be meaningless to Yaanek. So he asked how the Collective could justify the destruction of his very identity, as only this measure would rid him of his bibliophilia for good.

And Yaanek told him frankly that any notion of individual identity was a lie. There is no "self" to destroy. Once Glickman had grasped the final truth that the "I" does not exist, that his past life was illusory, then he would be free. All perception is a series of mental states, unfixed, fluid; like text, devoid of central meaning. The destruction of books was simply the first stage of a greater purpose: the gradual elimination of human consciousness.

"We are anti-publishers," said Yaanek, "and ultimately, anti-thinkers."

Yaanek left him and the nameless clerks entered the cell again. Glickman almost screamed when he saw them, for he knew then that it was not required of him to agree to merely cooperate with the Collective. As the waves of telepathic thought hit his brain, ruthlessly moulding it to their design, he knew that he was required to adore its aims.

Whilst receiving the mental transmissions Glickman learnt more: close proximity was required for the telepathic remoulding of his thought patterns to be completely successful. Over a distance the agents of the Collective could only inspire thoughts within groups of individuals for a short space of time and then only at random. The clerks would gather together in an upper chamber of the building and send out the impulses to destroy books across the world using their telepathic ability.

And for the first time, Glickman found that he was taking pleasure from such a prospect. As the telepathic revelations bore deeper into his brain, he found that he could no longer, or rather would no longer, resist its implications. Something snapped in his mind for good. And when the two clerks desisted from bombarding his brain with their thoughts his mind at last felt crystalline and untroubled, like the clear waters of a stream, avoiding all obstacles in its path.

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When Glickman was taken from the cell, he begged to be allowed to join in the work of the Collective and they led him upstairs to the offices. He proved himself assiduous in his new duties as a book destructor and was even offered the chance to be freed, as a test, which offer was met with extreme horror on Glickman's part. But in order to test his loyalty further Yaanek sent him back to his home so that Glickman might lay waste to his own collection of books.

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Glickman reached home and began to set about his work eagerly. He tore joyously into the first shelf of books, slashing at the pages with a Stanley knife and gnawing them between his teeth. But as this method was far too inefficient he made a brazier in the back garden into which he could fling his volumes. His heart leapt as book after book was incinerated in the flames and black clouds of smoke billowed into the sky.

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It was a number of days later when Glickman returned to the offices of the Nemesis Press. During this period of time the epidemic of book destruction had intensified. Such was the increasing power of the telepathic commands issued by the Collective that those who tried to prevent their destruction were torn apart by angry mobs. The general populace overran all the army bases and police stations. The only computer systems now operating were those essential ones that might further the aims of the Collective.

The final stage was the elimination of all writers. They were rounded up and shot without compunction. It was recognised by the public that they were the greatest danger to the new order. It was a pleasing development, for the Collective had not yet telepathically instructed the populace to perform these acts.

Yaanek was in the offices alone at night when Glickman arrived. The building was deserted, its long corridors occupied only by shadows and darkness. The work of the Collective was almost done and the other operatives walked abroad in the city, relishing the chaos they had wrought. Yaanek sat at a bank of computer terminals in the dark central chamber, surrounded by the machines that confirmed the end was near and that the world was finished. The glow of the monitors reflected on his pale, moon-like face. Out of the corner of his eye he caught the emergence of a figure from the shadows and he turned to face the visitor.

It was the expression on Glickman's face that so filled Yaanek with a horrible wonder. It seemed to hint at another form of consciousness: one that included madness in some unique arrangement of the human thought processes. Yaanek recalled images of similar expressions he had seen in photographs: in the "Ultima Thule" daguerreotype of Poe, in the faces of the doomed Scott Antarctic expedition just after they reached the South Pole, and in the awful desolation of Friedrich Nietzsche's visage during his final decade of insanity.

Yaanek laughed as he stared at the former bibliophile, with tears of mad joy streaming down his cheeks. Here was the accomplishment of all of their dreams: an individual who could generate anti-thought! Yaanek found it all intolerably funny.

And afterwards, so did all the other clerks and operatives of the collective whom the two summoned to the building.

Then Glickman merged his limbs with the great computer and transferred his anti-thoughts into the machine's memory banks, uploading them as anti-code to satellites and broadcasting into outer space: a ritual of pure darkness.

Yaanek laughed as he worked.

So too did all the other zombies of the collective. They tore at each other in wild abandon; their deranged thoughts transmitted across the cosmos with even greater intensity, rending the veil between existence and

the void. Soon the cannibalism began and a myriad of red laughs echoed throughout the corridors of the Nemesis Press.

And information was drained out of everything.

A Question of Obeying Orders

Hanns Kugel cursed his luck. He'd lost his map and compass six hours ago in a muddy ditch and had to rely on the position of the sun in the sky in order to navigate through the forest in an easterly direction. It was now obvious to him that he'd missed his destination by some miles, and would have to decide between pressing on in the hope of coming across another village by accident or taking his chances by camping in the forest overnight. He recalled that timber wolves roamed this area and the weight of the rifle slung across his shoulders was a comforting burden.

He sat down on the fallen trunk of a tree, rummaged in the bulging pockets of his grey greatcoat and pulled out a slab of bread and cured sausage. Both had turned rotten and he cast them aside with disgust. The blood-orange sun had now dipped below the tops of the trees to his back, behind the leaves, casting long shadows. As soon as the sun had gone down, Kugel realised, the twilight would not last for more than a few minutes and then he would have to contend with utter darkness. He would press on, he decided, for another half hour and take his chances.

It would be ironic, he thought, if he were to perish out here in the wilderness after having deserted from the ranks of the Imperial German army. He had expected to meet his end when first he had fled from his comrades, accompanied by the startled cry of Kapitan Von Drost and a volley of rifle fire at this back. He had dodged and weaved like a rabbit until he was inside the cover of the forest, leaping, sprinting and hurling himself forward deeper and deeper into its depths until the pursuit had faltered.

Four months killing for the Kaiser at the Eastern Front had ended when the Russians had begun shooting their own officers and decided to return home. At this news he and his comrades had celebrated, certain that they would return to their own homes in return. They were all sick of blood, death and the thunder of artillery. But when Von Drost informed them that their company was to be honoured by redeployment on the Western Front, in order to crush the British pig-dogs, Kugel decided to desert and follow the example the Russians had set. It was soon apparent to him that he was alone in his resolve. Although just as sick of war, his fellow soldiers had no

stomach for revolution and would, like all good Germans, follow the orders of their superiors. And so he had fled alone.

Not more than five or six minutes of daylight left now, Kugel calculated. It was getting darker and darker. Had he not stopped to strike a match and light a cigarette he would have certainly missed the pathway. It was partially obscured by an enormous bramble bush. Kugel grinned in relief. He sucked the cigarette smoke into his lungs and tossed the match aside once it stung his fingers. He'd got a good enough glimpse for his purposes. The pathway ran down the side of the hill. It had been hacked out of the undergrowth and, although not well maintained, was evidently still in regular use.

He was glad of his sturdy boots as he scrambled down the path, for they granted him a sure footing in the gloom. But he was gladder still when, at last, the forest began to clear and he saw a church steeple, shadow-like against the sky, and less than a mile away across a field. So black was the nightfall that only when he began to cross this field, surveying it close at hand, did he notice its grim desolation. The grass underfoot was sparse and blighted, and grew in isolated patches amidst the dusty soil. All the life appeared to have been drained out of the vegetation, leaving a ghostly scrubland behind.

Kugel had been making for the church steeple when he saw light shining through a casement window from another building just off to the right. He turned towards the source of the illumination, drawn by the possibility of more comfortable shelter and discovered a dilapidated two-storey house, set back from the field and abutting upon an adjacent track. A lantern had been hung in the front window, its wick turned up full. Kugel chuckled to himself at the thought of the folk that dwelt in this remote part of the country, cut off from civilisation and harbouring irrational fears that had been handed down uncritically from generation to generation. He pulled the rifle from his shoulder and used its butt to hammer a summons on the door. If need be, Kugel decided, he would take occupancy of the house for the night by force, commandeer what provisions he could find, and then carry on eastward at dawn.

"Who's there?" an elderly male voice called out.

"A soldier of the Imperial army," Kugel shouted back, "open this door without delay."

The portal opened a fraction and a pair of rheumy eyes looked Kugel up and down.

“I cannot admit you,” the ancient said, “I have a guest and to disturb the circle could be hazardous to us all.”

Kugel was astonished by the old man’s idiocy. In order to provide emphasis to his reply he brought the butt of his rifle up in front of the man’s face as if about to strike him down.

“This is not a request, it is a command,” Kugel hissed.

“Then you had better come in, and I bid you welcome.”

The old man bowed. He was bald, thin, and sported a little white moustache. His skin was horribly wrinkled. Kugel addressed him again, more civilly this time:

“Private Hanns Kugel, at your service.”

“Steinberger, likewise. And the rest of your company? Surely you are not alone?”

“My company is scouting this area. They are hours away from here.” Kugel was not surprised that the old man appeared so eager to know the whereabouts of any more soldiers. He must have realised that the military have little compunction when it comes to taking what they want from the homes of gentlefolk. And the more soldiers, the greater their need.

“Please wait here,” Steinberger said, “as I explained, I have a guest in another part of the house. We are engaged in a séance. My wife is a medium.”

Kugel crossed the room and slumped down into a chair. He rested his rifle against the arm, keeping it close at hand in case he had to deal sharply with this lunatic. He had read that such persons could become violent in an instant, a state often triggered by an individual who questioned their manias, rather than humouring them.

“Guest?” Kugel said. “So, you are entertaining someone with this séance? Only one other?”

“Yes, besides my wife and I.”

“Then,” Kugel replied, trying hard to conceal the smirk he felt taking possession of his face, “you must have ample provisions. I trust I make myself plain?”

“Stay right where you are Private Kugel. I will bring bread and cheese. Somewhere, too, I have a bottle of wine.”

Once Kugel had greedily consumed his repast and drank most of the wine, he extracted his packet of cigarettes from inside his jacket, lit one with the candle on the table, drew on it, paused, and then blew out deep blue smoke into the air. The wine had made his thoughts hazy and tobacco aided his concentration.

He flicked ash from the tip and addressed Steinberger again.

"So," he said, "now I should like to observe this séance of yours."

Kugel had no interest in superstitious rubbish, but he knew that, in his own interests, he had to verify that what Steinberger had told him was true.

Steinberger's gaze flickered to the rifle at Kugel's side. The soldier had not failed to notice this reaction. He was grateful for the weapon's power of persuasion. He shouldered the rifle by its leather strap, got up and waved its gun barrel towards the hallway door.

"Lead on, Herr Steinberger," he chuckled, stubbing out his cigarette on the floor with his boot, "and introduce me to your wife and guest."

Kugel wondered if she was as crazy as her husband.

Steinberger bowed. Kugel followed the old man through a door into a narrow corridor until they reached another door at the end.

"Claudia my dear," Steinberger said as he opened it, "we have another visitor."

Steinberger's wife lay on a four-poster bed. She was an emaciated young woman with long black hair that fanned out across the white pillows beneath her head. There was something lupine about her long, bony face. But the strangeness of her features paled instantly in comparison with the sight of the guest seated on one side of the bed. Kugel almost reeled with shock. The "guest" was a black-suited corpse in a high-backed chair. Its face had been eaten away by worms and decay, leaving little more than a skull remaining. The Steinbergers are grave robbers, thought Kugel.

He had seen a great deal, far too much, of the dead. He had been in close quarters with corpses before, both Germans and Russians, lying in battlefields. He was familiar with them. He knew their smell, the stomach-turning stench of decay, syrupy and cloying.

Yes, he knew the dead. But he knew them only as victims of battle, as inert objects. To see one of those things turn towards him, to see it start at the unexpected appearance of the living—that was a sight he had never thought to experience. He had heard the local legends of corpses who came back to haunt the living and to feed off them. Vampyr, they were called, and

he had laughed at the idea, nothing more than fairy tales to frighten children.

Kugel recovered his composure and managed to get off a shot only when the corpse was halfway across the room and heading for the broken-open casement. He hit it square in its back, but the thing did not stop. It shuddered momentarily as if caught in a chilly draught and then kept going, crawling across the window ledge and out into the night air on all fours.

Kugel went after it in pursuit. He looked back once, as he climbed through the window, and saw Steinberger framed in the doorway, leaning against the jamb for support. His wife was staring after Kugel with a curious expression, albeit one that he did not have time to analyse. Her mouth was bloody, as if the thing had struck her across the face, seeking her silence and submission. But at least the two men had entered before the creature had done anything worse.

Outside, he could just make out the crouched shape of his quarry scurrying across the blighted field. He ran after it, unable to get a clear shot due to the darkness and his own rapid motion. He felt an instinctive revulsion at the thing, a desire to blot out its unnatural existence, and it was this sense, rather than any noble motive, that drove him on. Something dead had no right to walk amongst the living. It was an abomination, a rupture in the sane universe that had to be sealed. It mocked the memory of his fallen comrades, gone to their final peace in death.

Its destination became clear. It was heading in the direction of the steeple and, as Kugel approached the structure himself, in the creature's wake, he now discerned the churchyard sheltering below. It was enclosed by railings and contained a jumble of gravestones and slabs. Kugel stopped, for he could make out the corpse scaling the railings, its shadowy outline high in the air. He took aim, fired, and saw it shudder again at the impact of the bullet in its neck. But he did not bring it down with his shot. In the next instant it had vanished amongst the gravestones and Kugel continued his pursuit.

Once over the railings, Kugel saw a figure waiting for him. At first he feared it was the creature lying in ambush, but it was a middle-aged sexton clad in clerical black, and he carried a spade. His hatchet face was soaked with sweat.

"I heard the shot," the man said, "but a bullet can't stop the dead. I've dealt with two-dozen of these things. I've buried them and I've seen them

come back. But if they do, I've made sure they stay in their graves thereafter. Now let's finish this thing off. It crept down into that shallow grave over there."

"Not before I have a few questions answered," said Kugel, "or, I swear, I'll shoot you where you stand."

"Don't be a fool. Shoot me if you will, but I'll delay not a moment longer."

The sexton got to work at once with his spade, sparing scarcely a glance over at Kugel who stood there with his rifle half-raised, unsure of what to do. After a while he lowered his weapon and watched the sexton uncover the layer of soil beneath which the corpse had hastily hidden itself.

The sexton positioned himself at the ready and then raised his spade. Kugel now had his rifle poised, as the sexton stood astride the thing within the shallow grave. Its eyelids flickered open. The sexton drove his spade into its already badly wounded neck, severing the head in one powerful stroke. Then he turned the body over, chest-down, and producing a hammer and iron spike from the bag slung across his back, impaled the thing.

The two men sat down on a nearby slab and the sexton mopped his brow with a handkerchief.

"I tell you, soldier, this is a hellish place. All the life has been drained out of it, and only death remains. Thanks be to God that there are no more left for her to summon . . ."

"How many more of these graves contain vampyr?" Kugel said, laying his rifle across his knees with shaking hands.

"Vampyr? Why do you mention that word? Here there are no vampyr, only the restless dead. It is a mercy we have done, for we have ended its torment," the sexton replied.

"But I saw the thing, it attacked Steinberger's wife and tried to drink her blood..."

"*She* called it forth with her black magic. The same black magic she used to destroy our village. The evil in this village is not vampyr. I tried to put a stop to it, I smashed his precious wife's legs so she could no longer come here, so that she could no longer take her unholy nourishment from those who should be at rest. Vampyr? Idiot!"

Kugel could not think straight. This whole business was confusing. He felt cold and numb. Funny that he had not noticed it before, but only now was he bothered by the fact he had long since ceased to blink. He absent-

mindedly ran his fingers over the left side of his body and discovered two bullet holes in his tunic. It was then that he aimed his rifle at the sexton and pulled the trigger.

The séance was calling to him, and he could not resist the summons.

Nor Unto Death Utterly By Edmund Bertrand

"And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will."

Joseph Glanvill

It was in England that I met, for the first and the last time, the unfortunate, albeit extravagantly wealthy, gentleman who forms the central character in my strange narrative. He I shall designate under the appellation "Mr. Arnold". His true name is known to me, but, for my life, I should not reveal it to the public. Locked away for years in the only habitable quarter of the ancient abbey he had once newly restored but which had subsequently and rapidly fallen back into its former state of ruination, his was an existence of inconceivable isolation. He admitted no visitor within the precincts of his gloomy and sacred redoubt, scorned the customary retinue of servants, and was tended to by an aged valet who lacked the power of speech and whose auditory sense had diminished almost to a complete absence.

I had learnt, by rumor in the nearest village, that "Mr. Arnold" had twice been wed, but both of his wives had died under extremely tragic circumstances, their deaths being horrible, albeit mercifully swift.

Of the first, it was said she might have hailed from the Rhineland but even this is mere conjecture. The truth is her nationality was unknown; indeed everything about her is shrouded in mystery, even her ancestral name. Of the second, I was told she was English, and of noble birth, of long and distinguished ancestry, but, alas, the strain of financial uncertainty had fallen upon her titled family, and the lady had been encouraged by her parents into a union fatal not only to her happiness but to her very life itself.

Perhaps it might be apposite for me, at this juncture, to give some indication of the *circumstances* that led me to make the acquaintance of "Mr. Arnold". Such was his remarkable and lengthy term of isolation I believe it to have been his design to see not another living soul during the remaining years of his drear sojourn on the earth. And yet there remains at

least one profession with which civilized mankind does come into contact, alas, if only in moments of extreme distress.

To elucidate, not to say continue with, my narrative, then; “Mr. Arnold” had need of a physician, in which profession I have the honor to practice. And the melancholy truth of the matter was this: *the patient was dying*, though at the time he knew it not. Indeed, he seemed to labor under the absurd notion that to die was not part of the natural order of providence, but rather a consequence of a *lack of mental effort to stay alive*. Naturally this afforded me with substance for wonder, and I debated whether he held the philosophical view derived from Bishop Berkeley, or some variant of a cast even more outlandish than the assertion there is no matter in existence, only pure mentation.

Even had he held such an *outré* perspective on the riddle of being itself—and why I thought, if all creation exists as thought, cannot pain be dismissed, as one might cease to think of any object and thus extinguish its existence? —it did not prevent him from summoning me, a man who deals with the physical body, *not as a phantom*, to assist him. And this summons on the first occasion he experienced the *violently* hideous manifestation of that pain to which all sufferers of his fatal intestinal malady are eventually subject. So I found myself at the abbey whence this “Mr. Arnold” dwelt in supreme isolation.

Chronic and intolerable costiveness, accompanied, as is usual in such cases, by fever and delirium, had been the sum of “Mr. Arnold’s” existence for several weeks, and when he had begun to vomit faecal matter, finally, only in this extremity and profound loss of dignity, had his aged valet arranged for my attendance, *despite* the objections of “Mr. Arnold” himself.

This defiant course of action on the part of a servant—one undertaken in the wild but earnest certitude his master might obtain relief through the ministrations of a specialist—commenced my own involvement in the affair. It is only with a confused recollection I bring to mind the memory of that summons.

Nevertheless, thus it was, one gaunt, pale and mist-sodden day in January 1868, I found myself alone on horseback, a lone traveler through the barren and weed-choked landscape that surrounded the abbey in which dwelt the fabulously wealthy, *outré* and dying “Mr. Arnold”.

Situated on a plateau, the half-cavernous structure was bounded on one side by a moor and by a precipitous cliff on the other. It was said by the

local fisherman that all of the sea within sight of the cliff returned empty nets, and they had ceased to trawl it for years—for the life had been drained therefrom. And if it did not give up any catches, neither did it rage in union with the heavens during a storm. It remained seemingly aloof from the rest of nature, being always inert. The villagers said nine of their number had gone down to doom in that sea's clammy embrace, and suicidal madness claimed anyone who saw the full moon's ghastly reflection upon its surface, a reflection gray and motionless, like the face of a corpse.

My journey to the abbey took me across the shingled beach beneath the cliff and, as I spurred my mount up the hewn pathway that climbed to the plateau, I tried not to look back at the gaunt expanse of water behind me. At last I cleared the region of the cliff side, left all sight of the sea behind, and crossed the plateau. Although I had hoped for some relief from the spectral atmosphere, such relief was not forthcoming—the plateau only intensified my gloom. Its sole form of life consisted of curiously horrible weeds that sprang from a gray soil more like dust than earth. The masses of knee-high weeds seemed to undulate, though no wind was present to stir them. Strange indeed it was, but in that place even the shadows played tricks, appearing without a visible source, as amorphous as disordered dreams. I thought them at first to be cast by immense ebony-feathered wings swooping overhead, but upon proceeding further I discovered, without exception, all wildlife shunned the region.

Let me now attempt a description of the castellated abbey in which "Mr. Arnold" had ensconced himself. It was an edifice of verdant decay, over which gray vines had slithered like tentacles, and what restoration had been carried out was seemingly confined to the chambers within. Without, the edifice remained the very soul of antique England, a survivor from that ancient land where, for hundreds of years, cowled monks had held mystic rites before becoming victims of the upheaval during the English Reformation.

But within, ah *within*! Once I had dismounted from my horse and been admitted into the abbey's precincts by the aged valet, my astonishment continued, not only unabated, but also actually *intensified* in degree. My gaze scanned the magnificence of his apartments and it was apparent "Mr. Arnold" had engaged himself upon an extensive form of repair, but a form in which *modernity* played no part; other than to facilitate the return of the *glory of the past*.

Amidst the plethora of vanished civilizations that have gone down into destruction, “Mr. Arnold” had settled upon one to whom he owed primary spiritual and intellectual allegiance, and, thus, were the solemn carvings and cryptic sarcophagi of infinitely mysterious Egypt the chief ornaments in the gloomy and dreary grandeur of the building. Fitting was it that his dwelling place should pay tribute to a civilization that, down immemorial centuries, retains a mystique for its fascination with death and with the enigma of the afterlife.

“I perceive,” said “Mr. Arnold” shortly after my arrival, “you evince some astonishment at my choice of decor. Well might you be astonished, for nowhere else in England can there be an interior to rival it for dark splendor.”

“It is indeed remarkable, and quite as remarkable as the territory without, across which I have traveled in order to reach you. But I am here as a physician, and, it is this duty to which I must apply myself rather than the distractions of untrammeled imagination. Come, let me examine you,” I replied.

We retired to a chamber into which boiling water might be brought easily by his aged valet, and it was therein I commenced my ministrations. They were successful, and afforded “Mr. Arnold” instant relief, but I saw the benefits provided were strictly in the nature of a temporary respite. His condition was hopeless. In order for any relief to be obtained, it would be necessary for me to remain close at hand during the few weeks of life he had left to him. I informed him of this intelligence, and he agreed at once, not surprisingly, that I should be domiciled within the abbey until such time as my ministrations were no longer required. But upon these, the details of his malady, his deeply held shame and keen sense of dependency let me dwell no longer. And so it was, suffice to say, despite my trepidations, I became resident within the confines of that isolated place, a place isolated, I felt, not only by distance but also by an aura of spiritual desolation.

I had believed us three in number; “Mr. Arnold”, his stealthy and aged valet, and myself—but upon my continued existence within the abbey I thought I detected the presence of another. Such detection was, at first, of the most nebulous type; a fleeting shadow crossing a loggia, a distant bell-like tinkling of laughter and the faint trace lingering in the air of some exquisite perfume, but no more.

I owned it possible the parlous state of his mind might have come to exert an influence upon mine. Nevertheless these signs, upon which I did not at first see fit to remark to my host, soon developed into an indication of a fourth presence I could not ascribe entirely to hallucination. However, though I might have accounted for such signs of occupancy as mere fancies on the part of “Mr. Arnold”—for, as the days passed, it soon became evident that my host was a slave to his imagination; an imagination that had, furthermore, been abnormally stimulated, nay, perhaps even *diseased*, by frequent recourse to tincture of opium—I was, alas, never certain whether opium formed the sole begetter of the phantasm.

Naturally, I should have realized that his predilection for the drug was the cause of his costiveness, for, as well as provoking day-dreams, so too does opium-eating affect those *bodily* as well those *mental* functions upon which the individual is dependent. By way of corroboration, I was aware—increasingly—of my patient’s habit to lie abed long into the afternoon, lost in search of sleep, a result directly attributable to the after-effects of an opium debauch undertaken during the small hours of the previous night. Often would he not emerge until such hour as the sun had exhausted its dying light and had seemed to be consumed utterly by the gaunt corpse-sea beyond the darkening horizon.

Much time he spent in his extensive library, consulting the rare and curious volumes he had accumulated. They were riddled with strips of paper serving as bookmarks, and their battered condition told of research conducted with scant regard for the objects’ value in and of themselves, attention being paid only to what information they might yield up to a scholar of transcendent mysteries. The contents of the library, he told me, had been gathered together through the design of his first wife and accurately reflected the gigantic acquisition of knowledge she had attained. The modern dialects were well represented—roughly equal in proportion to those of classical antiquity—but it was the recondite subject matter of the collection that most aroused within me a sense of bewildered wonder. Almost all of the tomes represented some facet of an outwardly chaotic scheme of metaphysical investigation, and so I cannot hope to give more than an inkling of the wide survey of esoteric learning encompassed.

It is true that amongst works by the church divines (such as Berkeley and Hampole) there were represented, too, obscure treatises on alchemy, meditations on the Egyptian *Hermetica,* and worm-eaten grimoires from the

Middle Ages. Yet these latter and barbarous items were, I believe, chosen for a purpose not entirely in accordance with the dubious intent of their authors, for these tomes were mingled too, indiscriminately, with modern publications from scientific men; the likes of Lobachevsky, the Marquis de Laplace, Volta and dozens more whose names I cannot recall, but whose researches have been doubtless celebrated by the Academy.

"The purpose?" "Mr. Arnold" replied, when I made enquiry as to the nature of his scholarly investigations. "Why, when *she* was numbered amongst the living, and was my guide, we sought together nothing less than the ultimate wisdom. And now? *And now*, I fear my only hope is to ward off an impending eternity of madness."

His pale, trembling hand snaked across the tabletop for the decanter of ruby-colored liquid and he proceeded to drink.

•

"You have doubtless heard," said "Mr. Arnold" some considerable days later and apropos of nothing, as he emerged into my room unannounced, "rumors concerning the disappearance of my second wife, the Lady Rowena of Trevanion?"

"A gentleman, and, it is needless to add, one's personal physician," I replied, "would scarcely give much credence to the idle speculations of the multitude."

"You are wise to hold such a view. These rumors are naught but base lies! No living person, save myself, knows the awful truth!" he cried, his teeth grinding together against each other.

There was, in this abstracted and unselfconscious manner, proof he had once again recently consumed a large quantity of opium, despite the prohibition I had issued against its continued use. Indeed, his degree of intoxication became apparent when he fairly staggered across the room and finally collapsed upon the divan situated in the far corner. His nightclothes were disheveled. His flesh had a yellow-gray pallor—of exactly that shade I have seen previously *only in those already dead*. His gaze seemed incapable of focusing intently upon any external object but wandered aimlessly around the chamber, as if he were inwardly mesmerized by visions—and such visions as are found in hellish nightmare.

"Pray excuse my air of distraction," he said, suddenly conscious of my gaze upon him, "the melancholy truth is that my thoughts seem scarcely my own. Say rather they are consumed by she *who cannot be forgotten*."

“You refer again to the Lady Rowena?” I replied.

“Rowena?” He laughed, stuffing the knuckles of his left hand into his lips to arrest an unbecoming display of emotion. “Rowena, you say? Nay, I speak not of the weak-willed Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine. She, of the fair-hair and the blue eyes? No, and again I say no. I speak, rather, of my first wife. My true wife. She of the dark eyes and the hair that is raven-black as midnight! Ligeia! She, whose breadth of knowledge has no equal in our sublunary world. Aye! I speak of *the Lady Ligeia*, she whose origins lie in Mystery and whose goal is the ultimate wisdom. Ligeia the Undying. She, more than mere woman, she, whose Will is immortal!”

“I thought—” and although I hesitated to utter it aloud, nevertheless, I *did say*, after a momentary pause, “—the Lady Ligeia, alas, like the Lady Rowena, to be no more.”

“Mr. Arnold” lapsed into silence, responding only with a twisted, sarcastic smile. The effects of his opium debauch now overwhelmed him. His eyes rolled up into his sockets just before his eyelids closed and he drifted insensibly into the realm of Morpheus. I noticed, at this juncture, he held within his grasp a crumpled scrap of paper. I confess that my curiosity was aroused and, when he had reached the nadir of temporary oblivion, his clutch upon the item loosened. It fell fluttering to the floor, and I could not refrain myself from picking it up and casting my gaze over the contents, before laying it on his heaving breast.

It was a poem, and one, despite the reservations I have in making the assertion—for I am no expert on the form—that followed haphazardly the conventional rules of rhyme or scansion. Moreover, it contained such a bizarre medley of horrible images as to be the product of a diseased mind. This impression was strengthened by a third element, namely the *handwriting in which the verse had been penned*. It was legible, true, but evinced no internal consistency, and was as diverse as if the result of multiple rather than single authorship. I can therefore only *attempt* to give some indication as to its delirious nature, for I saw it but once and then briefly. I own this much: my *impression* is that it burnt itself upon my memory, but this may only be *fancy* on my part. Nevertheless, in my attempts to reproduce the poem faithfully for my readers, the clarity of that past moment *seems as real* as this very instant. Here, then, I set it down, for the purposes of this narrative:

The worms are busy in their deeds,
Lo!, Horror beyond compare
Bodies decay, their eyes are bright
with terrifying, mortifying, deadly night—
Whilst I, Siren of the Abyss, summon thee to death
in nightmare, in all that causeth Pain
tormented and yet undying still
Lo!, Horror beyond compare.

Drag down the living to the tomb,
Lo!, Horror beyond compare
rotting, dreaming, & lost in Hell
each petrifying, horrifying moment wrought
by me, Maiden of the Abyss, Haunter of the Pit,
like madness in all of Mankind looms
abandoned by hope—abandoned still!
Lo!, Horror beyond compare.

I was thy teacher—thy true love!
Lo!, Horror beyond compare
mercy ne'er found within our world,
the terrifying intensity within thought!
In me, Angel of the Chasms, Dweller in the Gulf
the brooding of some foul gargoyle mind,
Ultimate in Truth, Eternal Will—
Lo!, Horror beyond compare!

At the conclusion of the verse it bore a signature and date—

"Ligeia, October 7, 1849".

Yesterday! I could scarcely credit the evidence of my eyes. Had, then, "Mr. Arnold" written this poem himself in the mad frenzy of some opium dream and signed it in his dead wife's name? Surely no other reasonable explanation was possible?

The speculation had scarcely arisen in my mind when I became aware of a low and prolonged groan issuing from the ashen lips of “Mr. Arnold”. He slumbered, and from the anguished expression that now seized his features, he dreamed—and that he was in the grip of nightmare was apparent. When he spoke from the abyss of dream, it was with that dreadful voice which characterizes the sleep-talker, whose utterances have been loosed from the moorings of waking consciousness.

“Ligeia!” he cried, “She of the black and the wild eyes!”

Fascinated by the drama unfolding before me, nevertheless I moved towards my host and prepared to attempt to awaken him should his visible distress approach an injurious degree of intensity.

He spoke again, but now, to my horror, in a voice quite unlike his own —

“Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will.”

The shock of hearing such a complete change in the timbre and pitch of his voice made me start back, recoiling even from my bounden duty as a physician. Momentarily I forgot myself, a slave to the dictates of the phantasm FEAR. Some terrible change had affected not only my patient, but also the very confines in which the motley drama was being enacted, for the shadows in that phantasmagoric chamber seemed to have taken on a life of their own, flitting up and down the arabesque designs on the tapestries that shrouded the vast and lofty walls.

“—But *had she then grown taller since her malady?*” were the words he next cried aloud; his speech having returned to its usual form.

I overcame my immobility, willing myself to draw nearer “Mr. Arnold”, so as the better to observe his condition. As soon as I was within less than a yard of his trembling frame his eyes flickered open and his gaze locked onto my own. The expression in those eyes was impossible to define; it seemed a compound of myriad forms and reminded me of a kaleidoscopic series of disparate analogies in co-existence. I was reminded of the following (all as *aspects* of a single mysterious whole); of the moon viewed at sunset, of the dying ember of a candle stub, of the motion of a hungry spider, of a blemish wrought by leprosy, and of something I can only put into words as the *geometry* of the color yellow. All these elements flashed over my consciousness in an instant, but so too did a much less nebulous realization, one that caused me to utter an involuntary cry of

amazement, a cry which echoed in the dim confines of the lofty and vaulted ceiling of the chamber.

The irises of the eyes of “Mr. Arnold” were, I distinctly recalled, a light green hue, but now, *but now*, they had inexplicably turned *jet-black*. The orbs that observed me were not those of “Mr. Arnold” at all, but of some intrusive entity that appeared to have taken occupancy of him and which had neglected to completely disguise its presence within.

As if in response to this suspicion on my part, his eyelids flickered, then drooped and finally closed, and he turned away from me with a groan, burying his face in the cushions upon the divan. *He did not cease to speak, however, and to communicate in that other voice I have already described*. His muffled exclamations consisted solely of a series of names. Since it was with some considerable difficulty I was able to discern anything he uttered, the list I set down hereafter cannot be considered exhaustive:

“Ashoreth, Bacon, Glanvill, Democritus...”

And then, with “Mr. Arnold’s” face turned away from me, there came, as I stood there virtually stupefied, another physical transformation—and this one much more striking than any I had up to now observed. The full, but neatly trimmed black hair of my patient began, perceptibly, to *grow*. Like the movement of the minute hand on a timepiece it was scarcely discernible at first, and apparent after an interval in which disbelief can no longer be suspended. Within the passage of three minutes or so—during which I stood aghast—his voluminous tresses caressed the nape of his neck, and, within three more, passed his shoulders! The whole upper portion of his back had become hidden in the disheveled mass of raven-black hair before the process arrested itself and ceased altogether.

For my own part, I was transfixed, as if ensnared in the mind of another. The natural laws of the cosmos seemed suspended, along with my sense of volition. I had become a passive agent, a mere chronicler of events. It was with a sense of helplessness I realized the situation that had brought “Mr. Arnold” to this pass was beyond the amelioration of any physician—or indeed of any outside human agency. Here was a malady where *death* was not the end, but instead a form of *hideous metempsychosis*—a transformation beyond the capacity of human thought to comprehend in all its horror.

I could no longer hesitate and forced my limbs to obey the dictates of my mind again. I reached out my hand to the prostrate form upon the divan,

turning “Mr. Arnold” on his side so he faced me once more. I had not realized, with his back to me, and the covering mass of disheveled raven-black hair, the full extent of the alteration wrought upon “Mr. Arnold”. I should have noticed his apparel no longer fitted him, and the contours of his body had shifted radically; to assume *all the characteristics of the female form*. All this should have been obvious before I reached out a hand to grasp him by the shoulder and turn him towards me, even though, given the bizarre circumstances, my attention was understandably disordered and unreliable.

But that particular alteration to which I refer was not what constituted the culminating *horror of horrors*. It was the sight of *the face* of “Mr. Arnold” that caused me to scream uncontrollably, and thereafter to flee the spectral castellated abbey, hurtling frantically across the vast surrounding plateau, with my every step seemingly leaden, as if I were already drowning in nightmare.

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I am told I was discovered the next morning by one of the villagers, lying on the shingle beach beneath the sheer face of the cliff, with my clothes torn and covered in blood. I was told I raved incessantly, like some lunatic and had to be taken to the Mad-House. But, for my own part, I have no memory of the immediate aftermath—yet, what of the hideous face? Alas, *that* memory is an indelible stain upon my thoughts. Night after night it rises from the well of dream. During the day, persons glimpsed in shadow wear it like a mask. It troubles every mirror in which I see my reflection.

Had the face of “Mr. Arnold” been *merely the corpse-face of the Lady Ligeia*, I might not have lost my reason. But it was something greater and much more profound, something almost incommunicable. I know not what forbidden knowledge the Lady Ligeia possessed, or what revelation she had passed onto her husband, but I believe a black heaven had torn asunder every last shred of her identity and subsumed it into an expression of some ultimate, inhuman force made putrid by a hunger for bodily immortality in what is a transitory world.

It was the timeless face of all those who have rotted in their tombs in past ages and, so too, the face of all those who will rot in their tombs over the course of the centuries left in wait for us. Yes, *my* face was contained therein, as it will be after *my* death. Fools! How else could it be so, how otherwise in a vortex of infinite complexity? What I saw was the All and

the One. It was the Alpha and the Omega. They say *I am mad* when I insist upon telling them what I saw. Idiots! It is *they* who are *mad* and blind! My eyes beheld the truth—*the truth*, I say, concerning she who had ascended to the heavenly throne through the power of her own incomparable Will—see how, despite those fools, I do not hesitate to reveal the truth, *for I tell you now that Ligeia's face was the cadaverous face of Almighty God!*

A Contaminated Text

Hamlet: …My Lord, you played once in the university, you say.
Polonius: That I did my lord, and was accounted a good actor.
Hamlet: And what did you enact?
Polonius: I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed in the Capitol. Brutus killed me.

(Hamlet Act 3, Scene 2, 87–92)

When the José Vasconcelos Library opened in Mexico City in May 2006 it was mired in controversy. The opening was not public, but was by invitation only, and the whole project was forced through by President Vicente Fox who saw the building as his final chance to establish a permanent cultural legacy. Named after the celebrated Mexican philosopher and Government Head of Education, José Vasconcelos (b.1882 d.1959), the gargantuan modernist building was designed by Alberto Kalach (b.1960) to hold over two million volumes and seven hundred computer terminals in its forty-four thousand five-hundred square metres of space. Alas, it was beset by structural problems shortly afterwards. Its fantastical design, inspired by the Jorge Luis Borges story “The Library of Babel”, was found to be structurally insecure, and additional building work was required before it reopened in November 2008. The interior of the library is of a completely open plan design, with the staggering quantity of books themselves forming a titanic vista on all five levels. The volumes are housed in open tiers of metal bookshelves that project over the central hall, jutting out, as if suspended in immensity, and flanked by a veritable labyrinth of glass-floored walkways. The books are classified according to subject matter and language. As well as being classified by subject matter, there are whole sections of books written in English, German, Portuguese, French and so on.

One of the major objections to the “Megabiblioteca”, as it was popularly dubbed by the press, was that the building was not specially created to house a pre-existing collection, and, since its construction, it has

been dependent on a process of extraneous acquisition, taking on a mass of volumes donated by public and private publishers. As a consequence, much of its stock is duplicated. Roving around the shelves, a browsing reader cannot help but be struck by the fact he is likely to find the tiers occupied by multiple copies of the exact same edition of a book, often occupying the entirety of a shelf. This policy of deliberate duplication appears to be a consequence of expediency. Without it there would be whole tracts of empty space, like missing teeth in a smile, and the Borgesian aesthetic of innumerable books themselves forming the architecture of the library would be fatally compromised.

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Douglas Marlow had obtained his position as librarian in the Megabiblioteca quite by accident. He had been resident in Mexico City for less than a year when he attended a party given by the Minister of the Interior at the huge fortified ministry building on Bucareli. He had been invited along by a Mexican editor who worked at the Pasaje Publishing House, where he had been employed on a temporary basis as a translator, but the editor himself had failed to attend. Forced to mingle, Marlow had drunk a large volume of mezcal, gratis, and his indifferent Spanish blossomed under its effect. By the end of the evening, he had been offered a post as a trainee librarian, assigned to the English language section, after having struck up an interminable conversation with a bureaucrat.

His work at the library was not onerous, and he spent much of his time cataloguing stock, helping with enquiries, and occasionally assisting in the cloakroom, whenever required to do so.

During the second week of his employment, the library took possession of a crate of English language books, which Marlow was instructed to add to the institution’s existing stock. One of the books contained in the crate bore the title *The Abyss of Voola*. He was told the crate had come from the private collection of a notorious and unbelievably aged occultist in Chihuahua, who had tried to commit suicide and failed, despite having blown out half his brains with a revolver. Marlow learnt more from a series of papers that had been inserted inside the front cover of *The Abyss of Voola*, some of these papers were handwritten, some typed, but all apparently by this occultist, whose name was Wolfgang Martz (b.1860 d.?)

Martz believed himself to be in astral contact with creatures called the Voolans, a race of incredibly advanced entities, who dwelt deep inside the hollow earth and influenced mankind by telepathic control. Bulwer-Lytton had first written of them, but his facts were not entirely correct, for he had intuited them only feebly, and even then veiled them in a puerile Utopian symbolism.

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An excerpt from*The Abyss of Voola* transcribed by Dr Wolfgang Martz, 1920 (translated into English from the original German):

> Who are the Voolans? It seems clear to me that they are not denizens of Outer Space, but denizens of Inner Space. They haunt the interiors of hollow worlds. Ancient they are, but only in reverse, for they have come backwards in time from the ultimate future. For them the track of time is from end to beginning, and evolution is a process of return to the slime. Gods they were once, but fiends are they now.
>
> They praise naught but the joys of pain, of dragging down the universe with them in their own horrible death agonies. Men they adore, for they are sport, and their delight is in torturing them, and reducing their minds and bodies to travesties.
>
> All praise the Voolans! For they shall lay waste the illusions: all beauty, all hope and all love!
>
> Of their form let me tell.
>
> Voolans are akin to squid, and they possess eight tentacles. They crawl on all surfaces, floors, walls and ceilings. Their oily skin is black or coal-grey. Of eyes they possess four, all yellow, without pupils, equidistant around the diameter of their heads. Their two mouths are large and their teeth are long and sharp, fang-like. Upon human flesh they feast, once the victim is mutilated by weeks of drawn-out torture.
>
> Their world catacombs the planet, so vast and depthless, as to constitute a hollow earth. And of science they have forgotten more than we have ever learnt, and now their science is akin to sorcery, for their brains are diseased.
>
> They may occupy the body of men as they will it, by means telepathic, and they call them down into their lairs below ground, when the feasting time is come.

> And here is the truth: there is no conscious thought of men. All is Voola. The ways of men are as a game to them, and we dance like puppets to their whims. We are their entertainment.

•

In 1914, Martz joined the staff of the Mexico City insane asylum. He took up his position having theorised that certain patients suffering from "delusions" had access to other forms of consciousness. Martz believed that his contact with the Voolan entities placed him beyond good and evil. Morality, for Martz, was a question of expediency and advancing human development, that is, preparing the way for the reign of the Voolans on the surface world. He began experimenting on those inmates who were without families or associates who might take an interest in their condition, enabling him to act free from outside scrutiny. Orderlies and other doctors were bribed as necessary to maintain a conspiracy of silence. Rather than seeking to ameliorate psychoses or manias, it was Martz's mission to intensify them. This he would attempt to do by means of physical and mental torture, including the use of psychotropic drugs, electric shocks, sleep deprivation and even sexual abuse. He took notes of his patients' reactions, subjecting them to violent interrogation from that time onwards.

Most of his efforts were completely worthless, and his actions only served to hasten death in those who came under his control.

However there was one instance in which he achieved some startling results, with an elderly American inmate, an ex-officer in the Yankee Army during the U.S. Civil War. He was referred to in Martz's notes only as "Major X". This gentleman had obviously been a person of some note before the crushing bout of amnesia and violent paranoia that had led to his confinement. As soon as he was in Martz's clutches, the doctor ensured that he was beyond the assistance of the American consulate in Mexico City. Major X was in his early seventies when "treated" by Martz. He claimed to have been betrayed by Pancho Villa and to have written several books, including a diabolical dictionary.

In fact, Major X had been an initiate of a secret society in the United States during the 1890s. This society, called the Sodality of the Darkness, differed from the usual esoteric organisations in being atheist in its philosophy. It regarded claims of secret wisdom as being purely fictitious, to be deployed only as a means of literary inspiration. Amongst its West Coast members were George Sterling and W.C. Morrow, while its East

Coast members included Winfield Lovecraft and Robert W. Chambers. Despite being atheist in character, it seems that the imaginative current the group unleashed eventually overwhelmed some of the group, leading to suicides or madness.

In fact, the Sodality of the Darkness had, between them, succeeded in obtaining the text of a book called *The Abyss of Voola*. Winfield Lovecraft had written it down, from his dreams, in 1892, and suffered from madness and physical deformity thereafter. He claimed that the book was actually a living thing, with a will of its own. He was incarcerated in the Butler Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island and Major X (who Martz theorised must be the soldier and author Ambrose Bierce) then had the book in his safekeeping. *The Abyss of Voola* is a record of the dynastic rise of the Voolans and their final mental assault upon the upper world in order to bring it completely under their control.

Martz abandoned his post at the asylum after Major X died a raving maniac screaming for oblivion. Martz fled to his native Germany thereafter, before the Mexican authorities could take action against him, and was in possession of *The Abyss of Voola*.

Until his disappearance in 1934, which occurred during the Night of the Long Knives, he was a loyal supporter of Adolf Hitler, whom he regarded as a puppet of the Voolans. Martz (in an odd echoing of Bierce's fate) had escaped execution and returned to Mexico under an assumed name. Martz was regarded as a dangerous eccentric by the Nazi regime, which saw in his account of the Voolans a mythology antithetical to the Wagnerian Volk mythology they were trying to promote.

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And so, *The Abyss of Voola* had found its way to the Jose Vasconcelos Library. Marlow, the English librarian who handled the book thought little of it (he despised anything esoteric, being a staunch rationalist). He had glanced only at the first page, and it was filed away, carelessly, on the English language floor.

The first complaints began the following week. A student of the drama, who had loaned a copy of *Hamlet* by Shakespeare, found it possessed a corrupted text. The script incorporated quotes taken from another, then unidentified work. Moreover, the typeface was different. It was only when the librarians discovered the changes were taking place

across the whole of the section on English drama that it was regarded as a serious issue rather than an unfortunate coincidence or a practical joke.

After the script had been carelessly replaced on the shelves and left there for a couple of days, the Bard's text had been entirely displaced. Marlow recognised one of the invading excerpts from the first page of the book he had earlier filed away carelessly. Upon consulting it again, he realised that quotations from *The Abyss of Voola* were the source. The contamination had spread outward, in all directions, from the book. It was a textual fungus, or disease of language, that proved beyond the institution's ability to control. In that first week, every single volume in the library had been infected, although those furthest away from the nucleus may only have contained, initially, one or two errant letters of an incongruous typeface. Moreover, as the text spread, it adapted to the language in which the host text of each book had been written.

Those who loaned books from the library suffered from horrible, fragmentary dreams. They dreamt of a decayed city of inverted steeples shrouded in fog, of black stars in a blood-red sky, of being dead-but-alive, and of searching after a cryptic symbol of no human origin, a symbol which alone brought oblivion. They were tormented by a voice seeming to call from a great distance, a voice muttering unintelligible words, a voice that bubbled and spat like hot tar.

The Megabiblioteca was closed again, with the excuse being offered that further structural work was required. In fact, every single member of its staff had become mentally disturbed. They could scarcely avoid discovery of the source of the infection, *The Abyss of Voola*, once the dreams of reading all night began, and curiosity as to the further contents of the book had got the better of them all.

The authorities then came up with some other vague excuse about a contaminant in the water cooler supply, and thereafter all enquiries went unanswered. The national shame was too much to bear. The whole edifice was locked and boarded up.

Despite the Megabiblioteca having been quarantined, the infection had still got out. Those who had borrowed books from the institution and taken them home, soon found that, for them, all books were becoming *The Abyss of Voola.* Anyone who read from it suffered hysteria and a sense of ecstatic revelation, an epiphany swiftly followed by a series of recurring dreams, and finally brain damage. Marlow had torn his eyes out of their

sockets, and then consumed them, in some ghastly belief that by doing so he would see only the underworld of Voola. He believed that the book had been directing his actions since the beginning, and had duped him into filing it haphazardly on the shelves.

The afflicted dreamt of their own corpses emerging from funeral parlours and from hospital morgues, to wander the streets, each one muttering the same plaintive query in accents like bubbling tar. They dreamt of descending into the caverns of the earth, down and down, hypnotised by a telepathic summons until they reached the dread torture chambers. In their dreams they had thought themselves to be descending, but the legion of somnambulists were actually all gathering at the Megabiblioteca, outside its closed confines, and were stunned when awakened. Many of the Mexicans, being cynical and long distrustful of their government, believed that a biological weapon was being tested upon them, and conspiracy theories abounded. But no conspiracy theory, however wild, matched the reality of what was taking place.

For *The Abyss of Voola* did not exist. It had never existed. Men's minds had brought it into life, by writing over the text in existing books. And the Hollow Earth was but a symbol of the insides of a skull, and the alien thoughts that burrowed therein. The Voolans are co-existent only with consciousness and the ability to dream, for what we call "reality" is, without subjective perception, impossible. The brains of mankind house the Voolans. Or perhaps, vice versa. One cannot say for sure. And alas, if you who are reading this are able to comprehend what is merely an adulterated text, then you may already be amongst the ranks of the contaminated.

The Age of Decayed Futurity

Last night I finished work on my fourth novel. It is my greatest achievement, I think.

It was an incredibly untidy business. The results are scattered about all over this room in a hotel by the Baltic Sea, and I really must collate the myriad pages. I have been a victim of that unique mental fever from which only writers suffer. It is a malady brought on by a combination of a retreat into an inner world of the imagination and too much intense concentration. In this state the real world loses substantiality, and dreamlike visions from the depths of imagination take over completely.

I really had no idea just how quickly and intensively I would work. My first three novels had each taken at least two years to finish. Yet here I am surrounded by the first draft of my fourth after only two weeks. True, I have slept very little. But, above all, it was inspiration that took hold. Though perhaps *inspiration* is too weak a word for it. Let's say, more precisely, *synchronicity*.

For it was here that I learnt of the Reassembly Cartel.

In six months I had written nothing and it is upon my literary products that my continued existence is dependent. The reputation I had established floundered, my agent Leszek Choszcz had almost given up hope that any more worthwhile work would appear from my pen. My past books were out of print and my royalties were drying up. What money I had put aside during the period of my critical and popular acclaim was almost exhausted.

I came to the Grand Hotel in Sopot after he (my agent that is) recommended the place to me. He said that the hotel would provide all the things I was used to in Warsaw, but with none of the distractions. He told me that Marlene Dietrich and Adolf Hitler had both stayed here.

Does one consider a pleasant view a distraction to writing? I suppose it depends on the author. The view from my room afforded a view of the sea, the beach, and the Sopot Pier, the longest in Europe, its gaunt skeletal structure reaching several hundred metres out to sea. However, with it being mid-Winter, at least the place would not be overrun with tourists swarming like ants.

What I hadn't known was that Leszek was coming down to stay in the hotel for some of the time, doubtless to monitor my progress and keep me

on the straight and narrow.

He fancies himself an expert on the minds of writers.

Do you know the difference between psychiatrists and psychologists? The former are medically trained and are proper doctors. More importantly they can therefore also issue prescriptions. All one needs to do is to read up on symptoms beforehand, and then it is quite easy to obtain the drugs one requires in order to work, albeit not necessarily what one needs for long term health. I once spoke with a delightful and terribly revealing young male student doctor who told me the consultative aid most at use within the state-funded Health Service is something called the wikipedia on a computer.

Doctors fear displaying ignorance when it comes to making a diagnosis.

But I have long distrusted all doctors. As most right-minded women do. Doctors are too male and intrusive. Even the female ones. Filled with a sense of self-importance. They can't leave nature alone. They always want to meddle with it.

My name is Joanna Wolski. Perhaps, if you read books (so few nowadays seem to), you might have heard of me. I am a widow, and the author of three novels. Communist science fiction was huge in the 1960s, back in the days of the People's Republic. Even if you *have* heard of me, you *will not* be aware my thighs are dotted with little round burns. Often, when I am smoking and absolutely alone, I turn up my skirt and press the burning tip of my cigarette onto the cold white flesh of my thighs. The pain temporarily distracts me from the anguish I still feel at the loss of my very dear, late husband.

Any honest liar can write acclaimed fiction.

Nowadays the reading public don't care about anything other than a cheap thrill. That's all they've ever wanted.

All that's important is finding the right thrill at the right time for the right audience.

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When I first learnt of the Reassembly Cartel, I thought that they were just another of those conspiracy theories, such as the faked moon landing, the C.I.A. being behind 9/11 and secret alien—or Nazi—UFOs. Many of my acquaintances had an interest in such monomanias. They have, no doubt,

become the new articles of faith for those who reject the orthodox delusions like Christianity.

For my part, I smiled good-naturedly at their follies, feigned interest where required and popped another pill in order to deal with the problem of existing in an alien universe.

This is how it happened.

It was at a late night soiree given by Leszek Choszcz in the restaurant of the Sopot Grand Hotel that the conversation around the dinner table turned upon dead literary genres. Waving away the offer of a refill from a bottle of Chateau de Tours that was being passed anti-clockwise from person to person by the waiter, I made a comment about the reactionary appeal of ghost stories, and how the advent of electricity and socialism had largely killed off that genre.

When I made this remark one of our dinner guests, a former U.S. television soap-opera actor called Eugeniusz Kowalski overturned his wine glass, spilling the dark red liquid onto the white tablecloth.

He was also one of Leszek's clients, but this was the first time I'd met him. Kowalski was not someone you would forget.

He had obviously been in an accident of some kind. His disfigurement was shocking, for his face was a mass of overlapping scar tissue covering a severely misshapen skull. He looked like a gargoyle.

"If you were aware of the Reassembly Cartel," he said, "you would not be so quick to dismiss the idea of revenants."

"Then what, exactly," I replied, "is this 'Reassembly Cartel'?"

"It is a front group of billionaires with absolute power over human society. Their combined wealth is greater than any single nation state. But their names will be unfamiliar to you, because their identities are secret. They have no need of identification when they own whole continents. The greatest power in the world is now located in Los Angeles, U.S.A."

"But the cartel's existence has been reported in the media?" I said.

"They own the media. Nothing is said without their approval. They also control internet search engines."

He had fallen into my trap.

"Then how do *you* know about the existence of this cartel?" I said, having impaled his ugly little moth of a claim, or so I thought.

"This face is my evidence," he said, waving his hand in front of it. "I am an individual whom they seek to destroy. A gamekeeper turned

poacher.”

He then told a convoluted and fantastic tale, one that I will attempt to repeat in this narrative with as much impartiality as I can. At the time I believed little of it, but my conviction that he was telling the truth came shortly afterwards.

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We actors are close to God, I think.

People think of us as superficial, as just playing roles on the stage or screen. But it is a vocation much more significant than that. Actors have to make the attempt to try and *become* people who are not themselves, and to see life through their eyes.

I wanted to be a great actor. A Hollywood star.

In order to do so, talent is not enough, although *without* talent it is impossible. But there are those who will succeed, and those that will fail, and the only difference between them is not their talent (a question of degree) but whether they recognise that they do not work in a void.

Charm, contacts (*contacts! contacts! contacts!*), self-assertion and the seizing of opportunities are crucial. An actor cannot concern himself with anything other than furthering his own career. Why? Simple, and it is the golden rule of success; look out for number one as nobody else will do so. But above all, give praise, praise, praise, to those who you think may be useful.

Without publicity the actor becomes nothing.

The great actor remains in darkness, a mere nothing on the stage, unless he has the spotlight turned upon him.

Of that, I am convinced.

Ludwik Solski Theatre School, a long stint in flea-pit Krakow theatres, Program Three Polskie Radio, and then state television TVP 2.

I eventually appeared in a Polish film with English dialogue that did big box-office in the States, and from then on success seemed assured.

I knew, from the moment I arrived in L.A., and was picked up from the airport by limousine, that the hidden forces had brought me to them, right into the heartland of real power.

I soon secured a lead role in the network syndicated TV series *The Greatest Victory*, in which I portrayed a psychopathic British officer during the American War of Independence. My character, Cecil, the 11th Earl of Worcester, sexually abused children and put rebels into proto-concentration

camps where the captives were dissected and then fed, still alive, to the pet pigs of the goose-stepping Redcoats.

I was invited to Hollywood parties in Beverly Hills, where the coke was pure and the women beautiful and filthy. I mingled with porn stars, rock stars, TV stars and film stars.

But I made a mistake. At the time I thought it little more than a faux pas, but it's the reason my face looks like this.

It was the Polish accent that first caught my attention. Not unusual, of course, in L.A., but nevertheless, one's antennae still go up.

I looked across the ranks of the glitterati, sipping at my dry martini, trying to dodge the cocktail stick skewering an olive, and spotted the source of the voice. It came from a tall, bearded man with a black cloth wrapped around his forehead like a bandana. He was surrounded by a group of bored looking celebs. He looked rather like an Orthodox Jew, except for one strange detail. His complexion had a green tinge about it, as if he were using some outlandish foundation make-up on his skin.

"I do not mean," the bearded man said, "class war, cultural equality or the redistribution of wealth. Socialism is dead. This is something else altogether. The New Revolution will be when the unknown masses rise up to destroy the power behind celebrity. This power creates the idiot sports players, cretinous pop stars and soap opera mannequins who hypnotise the masses. The forces behind the media are more powerful in this world than are politicians. The greatest act of terrorism right now would be for the public to destroy their television sets and mobile phones, burn down the cinemas and throw their computers out the window. I want to see all commentators, newsreaders and media moguls dangling from lamp-posts. They have turned the people of the Western world into gaping-mouthed zombies staring at a screen all their lives. Their goal is to extend their control over as much, too, of the East as they can."

"What about the internet?" someone interjected, "that's not controlled, is it?"

He scarcely missed a beat.

"Big Business can shut down anything they like and dictate to governments. On the internet people think they have freedom of expression. But how can mankind communicate when everyone talks at the same time, and instead of listening, insists upon the *right to talk over* everyone else?"

The man stumbled a little on his feet. He was obviously blotto. But he held the attention of those around him. It was indeed remarkable that this soak felt he had the right to lambast the very entertainment culture that was providing him with the bourbon he was consuming at a prodigious rate.

Someone nudged my shoulder and I turned to look straight into the eyes of a person who looked like Humphrey Bogart after half a dozen facelifts.

“Crazy fucking Polack,” he drawled, “talking like that. Just because he used to be a big shot director.”

And then I realised who the ‘crazy fucking Polack’ was—Marek Zapolska. He’d given up on the studio system in the nineties, and gone independent after a series of blockbuster movies during the eighties. He’d been married to a string of Hollywood actresses, practically launching them to mega-stardom, all of a type: blonde, slim, stunning and at least six foot tall.

“The cult of Celebrity is killing our ability to determine our own values. The famous have the aura of magic, of power about them. We hold them in awe because of their appearances on the electronic altar; we worship the manifestations of these gods at the exact same time each day or week as in a ritual. And to see them in the flesh! Why, it is as if they have descended from Olympus to walk amongst mere mortals and grace them with their presence! Snatch their autographs before it is too late! Take a photo to record a brief sojourn on earth before they return to their own electronic dimension!”

It was hard not to laugh at the hypocritical prick. As if anyone would be bothering to listen to him if he were not a product of the very system he now appeared to despise. Perhaps his supply of tall twenty-year blondes had finally dried up.

The plastic-faced Humphrey Bogart at my elbow had wandered off somewhere, perhaps for a smoke outside, and I edged my way closer to the circle of people surrounding Marek Zapolska. I had the feeling he was leading up to something, and I wanted to be there, just in case. The old instinct I had for seeing an opening to my advantage wasn’t wrong, either.

“It makes no difference if you are of the right or of the left…the cult of Celebrity is in itself apolitical. In the modern world adherents of both political wings cry out for it, for no longer is knowledge power. Knowledge is only that junk which the leaders allow to be revealed to the masses

through the mass media. Knowledge can only be increased depending upon the accuracy of the information to which we have access. POWER is knowledge. And power is best achieved through celebrity. Nothing else in this world is of any worth. Fame, notoriety, recognition are everything. That's why my next film will be a satirical expose of the whole rotten system and the power behind it. It'll be my biggest sensation since *The Evil of Science*. I'm going to call it *Simplicissimus* in honour of my favourite author Gustav Meyrink."

Like a piranha drawn by blood in the water, I had darted through the weeds separating me from my prey, and was now close enough to Zapolska to make direct eye-contact.

"Of course," I said, in Polish, attracting the attention of the legendary director and all those surrounding him, "you'd need the right actor in the lead, someone who's not been corrupted by all the bullshit and treason to self-integrity that Hollywood requires. Perhaps even a fellow countryman!"

What was required to impress Marek Zapolska, in this instance, was a little European cultural snobbery. If that's what it took to get a part in his film, that's the role I'd play. Not much more than a minor detail to someone who'd starred as the psychopathic 11th Earl of Worcester ("The Butcher of Virginia") on cable TV.

"You're that Polish *kurwa* from the television series that portrays the British as a bunch of Nazis during the American War of Independence, aren't you?" Zapolska shot back in English (apart from the expletive). He was known as an ardent Anglophile, having lived in London for ten years during the sixties. His father had fought and died with the RAF during the Second World War.

I was not sure that any of the Americans present understood precisely the meaning of the word "kurwa", but the overall hostility came across clearly enough.

"Then again maybe you're just what I need to make my point. I like the ironic angle. An aspiring actor who's a part of the corruption, playing the role of a character dedicated to stamping it out," Zapolska said.

And so that's how I got the part.

I wish to God I hadn't. I had no idea what I was up against.

They say all publicity is good publicity. Well, they lie. Sometimes drawing attention to one's self is a bad mistake, especially with revelations that certain powers don't want out in the open. Zapolska's film was poison

to the industry. I hitched my star to it simply for the sake of notoriety. I was more than willing to play their game once I was in a position to do so. But I was stupid. I'd crossed the line.

Four weeks later the film *Simplicissimus* went into production. Zapolska had no need to worry about financing. His personal wealth was astronomical. But he had problems getting crew from the start. The project had already attracted negative comments from the trade papers, and people in the industry were warned off by a whispering campaign. Nevertheless, somehow, Zapolska got a cast and crew together. It was a combination of loyal veterans and newcomers, people that Hollywood couldn't control.

You probably all know those stories about Hollywood films that are cursed: *The Omen*, *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist*. Certain events portrayed in those movies subsequently took place in real life and happened to cast and crew members. People struck by lightning or decapitated. The ritual murder of Sharon Tate. Insanity indistinguishable from demonic possession. Our film wasn't supernatural, but it still dealt with a conspiracy of silence, one that would kill in order to keep its secrets.

Well, you won't be surprised to learn that people started dying. At first they'd just disappear. We lost our Key Grip a week into shooting. He vanished. Just didn't show up on day seven. No-one ever heard from him again. The Chief Hair Stylist fell off a tenth floor balcony in a condo on Playa Vista on day nine. Our 1st Assistant Camera was mown down by a hit and run driver on Santa Monica Boulevard in broad daylight. The car had mounted the sidewalk. That was on day twelve.

Zapolska was phlegmatic.

"I expected all this shit," he said to me as we going over some changes to my lines in his fourteen million dollar mansion off Mulholland Drive. We were sitting out back, by the Olympic-size pool, drinking bourbon and watching the lights of downtown L.A. twinkle in the smog. He'd played a couple of rounds of golf with his neighbour Jack Nicholson earlier in the day, and said he'd taken fifteen grand off the son-of-a-bitch. So he was celebrating.

"One of us has to go," Zapolska said, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose, "either me or Hollywood. And it ain't going to be me sonny boy. Not Marek Zapolska. No way."

I was suddenly aware of the enormity of his ego. Christ, my own was big enough. But only a Hollywood director who had been indulged in his

every whim since he was a twenty-three year old prodigy, a man who had been isolated from reality for twenty years, cocooned by fabulous wealth and acclaim, could have seriously thought he could take on the whole of tinsel town and bring it down.

"If need be, I'd gladly sacrifice the life of every bastard working on this picture in order to get it made. I don't care if I have to assemble a cast and crew a dozen times over," he said. And then he told me the true secret behind the Reassembly Cartel; the recondite forces behind the billionaires.

I believed him. And I decided then and there to get out. If I'd made the decision a day earlier, it would have been made in time. But I was too late.

Although Zapolska had no way of knowing, I was going to offer my services to the other side. I'd sell my story to the papers, tell them all that Zapolska was a fraud, get maximum publicity and get back onside with the Hollywood system.

I drove back towards the intersection with the Valley Circle Boulevard. It was as I approached a sharp bend at sixty miles an hour that I lost control of the vehicle. I pumped the brake pedal, but nothing happened, and the next thing I knew my brand-new Ford Explorer had hit the crash barrier, flipped right over it and catapulted into the woodland decline on the other side. The last thing I remember, a split second before unconsciousness, was that the air bag on my side didn't inflate.

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Eugeniusz Kowalski had finished his tale. He didn't bother to add that his disfigurement was the consequence of this accident.

"So there you have it. End of my career," he said. "Six days later and the 'Zapolska Mystery' was born. The butler said he'd come into Zapolska's bedroom to bring him his breakfast on a tray as usual. But all that was left of Zapolska was a huge mass of green vomit all over the bed. No-one could explain it. But I believe that he'd puked himself inside out with disgust. Those he sought to oppose had caused him to change form. They made him turn into a symbol of all that he detested."

"But you haven't explained anything at all about the secret of the so-called Reassembly Cartel," I said.

"You really want to know? OK, here's what Zapolska told me."

Kowalski paused and took a deep breath. I noticed his hands were trembling.

“The forces behind the Reassembly Cartel,” Kowalski said, dropping his voice to a whisper, “are all dead souls seeking to take over our world for their own purpose. They have no existence aside from electronic media; but they feed on real life. They’re broadcast ghouls from an already hideously decayed future. What people think they see in the street, at openings etc, are manufactured simulacra of humans employed by a world-wide media conspiracy to keep the truth from the masses. The actual celebrities are manufactured in the broadcast factories of the future. The reality is just the same transmissions bouncing around forever.

“You see, this future world is a condition for the persistence of our own world. Its geography is seen in the video recordings of UHF frequencies between TV channels, consisting of immense glaciers of static, the leftover radiation from the Big Bang. The future world is being backwardly projected in time, and it is comprised of anti-matter and controlled by the dead.

“The final goal of the Reassembly Cartel is a world of mental zombies who do nothing but mindlessly regurgitate the poisonous froth of broadcast infotainment.

“The future is already finished. It’s over, and what we’re getting is advance notice as the nature of time itself begins to rot away.”

There was an uncomfortable silence around the table once his final words had died away.

Then, shockingly, Eugeniusz Kowalski got to his feet and began screaming. None of us could calm him down. There was a huge rumpus with the waiter in the hotel restaurant, and half the diners were put off their suppers.

Kowalski was finally taken away in an ambulance.

I heard later that he screamed himself to death in the hospital to which he’d been taken. They tried sedatives, but he didn’t, or couldn’t, stop screaming and he finally died after bursting a blood vessel in his throat.

Like the death of a character in a cheap horror movie.

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The following morning I knew that the plot for my next novel had fallen into my lap. The delusions of Eugeniusz Kowalski and Marek Zapolska would form its basis. Except that, rather than its existence being the obvious product of paranoid fantasy, the Reassembly Cartel would be revealed as

actually controlling human affairs in secret and moulding reality to its own design.

I did not mention the idea to Leszek, for I hated discussing a work in progress, especially during its formative stage, and thereby giving away any indication as to its theme. Nevertheless, given what had occurred the previous evening with Eugeniusz Kowalski, I wondered whether Leszek did not suspect my intent, when I told him over breakfast that I was now ready to commence work.

His job done, Leszek went back to Warsaw.

All I had to do was turn on the television set in my room.

At first the images were conventional enough, but the more of it I watched, steeling myself to bear talkshows, adverts, soap-operas and all manner of junk, the more I came to recognise the truth of what Eugeniusz Kowalski had claimed. It was necessary to look out for those moments when the person (or rather the dead shell) on the screen was actually trying to communicate directly with me, the viewer. Isolated phrases took on significance, and when one collated these isolated phrases, a pattern emerged.

I discovered, after only two days of continuous viewing, without sleep, and kept awake by amphetamines, that the world of electronic signals is actually the real world and the one outside, *our one*, is a fake.

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This is the beginning of a new age. I have been busy, working on my magnum opus. More than ever I am convinced of its significance.

As it sets the dead sun throws long black shadows across the frozen beach.

I am wrapped in blankets, sitting on the balcony outside my hotel room and looking out over the seafront. My breath is a ghostly vapour. The Promenade is deserted. I haven’t seen a soul of late. Everyone appears to have fled the approaching wall of icy static.

I am a last witness to its advance. It rears up now in the middle distance like a titanic cliff-face, blotting out a swathe of the thin blue sky. And there is a deafening roaring and crashing as the electronic glacier bears down inexorably on the land, a sound like millions of television screens exploding, blown apart from within by nightmare images. I see glimpses of invading giant hordes of deformed crabs with gargoyle heads and green faces, revealing the shape we shall assume in hell. The monstrous glacier of

static consumes the pier in a grainy haze, obscuring its skeletal iron structure from view.

In my rigid right hand I clutch a pen. On my lap is a pad of paper. My fingers are numb, riddled with black frostbite, but I write on, page after page, consumed by the desire to set down in writing the images flooding into my mind. It is an effortless though frantic undertaking. Sometimes I close my fingers into a fist, digging the nails into the ball of my hand, but still clutching the pen, forcing it across the page time and time again.

I have crossed over. I am now inside the other world. I have become one with the electric cosmos of the dead.

There is nothing to do but write. I must write before I am consumed by outside forces. At all costs I must write. I will write anything to stay alive. To remain alive means to write.

No one is around to recoil at the sight of what I have done to myself.

My lips are chapped with the cold. I can barely move them. My teeth chatter in my mouth.

I stopped feeling sensation in my feet days ago. When I unwrapped the towels wound around the lower parts of my legs, I tore away strips of green and black flesh that had adhered to the fabric. Below the knee my limbs were gangrenous. The same thing is happening to my hands, my nose, and my ears. I crawl around on my belly, like some aimless crab, moving from one sheet of paper to another, writing and writing and writing and writing, until I can finish what I have begun, and before the wall of static obliterates everything in its path.

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“Joanna Wolski?” Leszek Choszcz snorted and shook his head ruefully. “At my suggestion she took herself off to that flashy northern seaside resort in the Pomerian Voivodeship. The last I saw of the woman was at a hotel dinner party at the Grand Hotel that I threw for her, and where she’d screamed her head off.”

“So her fourth novel was not completed?” said the publisher.

“Completed?” he replied. “Why, it wasn’t even properly begun. They found the poor woman dead in her hotel room. She’d perished of hypothermia. Forced open all the windows and fallen asleep naked on the tenth floor watching television. It was below freezing that night. As if that were not fantastic enough, apparently there was some talk of self-mutilation too. Quite, quite horrible.”

“But what about the book? How do you know it was never begun?”

“I saw the manuscript after her death. Wolski had numbered four hundred and fifteen sheets of blank paper. They were scattered all over the hotel room. There were only a few pages of mystical gibberish—geometrical signs—scrawled on those crumpled, empty pages. Naturally I destroyed them for the sake of her reputation.”

The Tower

My custom, for many weeks, just after awaking at dawn, was to walk the streets in the region around Kings Cross. They are a bewildering mixture of decay and modern renovation. A number of the buildings seem in danger of being pulled down, because they do not appear to fit the image of the brand new and commercially successful ideal the redevelopers have in mind.

I think of the “Lighthouse” (which has no light) atop a dilapidated building on the corner of the Gray’s Inn Road, just opposite the station.

I think of the old Eastern Goods Yard just north of the station, its sidings abandoned, the vast wooden structure now scarcely covered by the paint that has turned grey and peeled off, its bulk surrounded by a field of weeds that have broken through the pavement. It, along with Granary Square, will soon be remade, and turned into something as grotesque in appearance as an elderly woman who has become the casualty of too much plastic surgery.

I think also of the wharves, where cargoes were offloaded from narrowboats on Regents Canal, the buildings now lost to chic design companies who produce nothing of lasting value.

It is still possible to wander in this area and discover corpse structures: closed-down and boarded-up pubs left abandoned, the silent remains of a record shop that sold vinyl, an empty sex shop with dust obscured windows, fast food restaurants where now only hordes of vermin feed. I remember passing by all of these places when they were still active. Now they are gutted, with only decaying outward shells as reminders of their having been there at all. In a few more years even these remnants will have vanished completely—“regenerated” into yet another useless tentacle of corporate nonsense.

As I wandered in the early morning sunlight, golden and dazzling, it seemed to me that the remains of the past were more beautiful than what was to come. The future offered no prospect but a soulless death, all the more terrifying for its not being acknowledged. The solidity of the past, the idea of permanence, was over, and it had been replaced by a new ethos of disposability and change for its own sake, under the guise of so called “progress”. But progress towards what destination?

For no destination seemed to be in mind, only “progress” for its own sake, only an end that could not be reached, only the doing away with all that shows any sign of having reached old age. The human race now lives solely in order to try and prolong its own youth indefinitely. And that was progress?

Those ruined and decayed remains of buildings that have been abandoned due to their commercial worthlessness have more mystery about them than any number of new glass and steel developments. They are testaments to the truth that the city is not solely the business centre its rulers would have us take pride in, but that it is an organic entity with an occult life and history of its own. For there are still ghosts in those shells, and, just as long as memory lingers and imagination is not stamped out by the profit motive, the ghosts will live on.

And so, when morning was over, once the sun had risen higher in the sky, once the traffic had begun to swarm, and the commuters had streamed out of St Pancras, Kings Cross and Euston, to tramp the streets and take possession of the buildings like an army of occupation, once commercial activities reigned, I retreated to my garret in a squalid, horrible edifice further north, and I pursued my campaign of resistance in occupied territory: my enemies being the fearful foes who would reduce all spirit, wonder and beauty to mere semantics, madness and insignificance. I continued, against all obstacles, to resist the vengeful by refusing to recognise their dominion.

After a while I ceased to visit the region around Kings Cross, having reached the point where I could no longer bear its transformation, and I made the district wherein I dwelt the limit of my universe. With this act of psychogeographical withdrawal, and perhaps as a consequence of it, the Tower appeared for the first time.

On that morning the entire city was shrouded with a deep mist, rendering existence within its confines ghostly. All other edifices became nebulous, but this one structure seemed to draw its own clarity from the degree to which others were obscured. It stood out in stark relief against the grey murky atmosphere that had descended like a pall. Naturally, I thought myself to be, at first, the victim of my own imagination. I was acutely aware of the degree to which I had become isolated from other people, and aware of the pitfalls that follow an intense degree of self-absorption. I had suffered periods of paranoia, of depression and of loneliness, but I regarded

myself as nevertheless psychologically intact, since my capacity to make critical judgements with regards to my own state of mind remained clear.

I had, of course, seen the same view innumerable times before, and it was quite familiar to me. But this time, from the profusion of the mist, there appeared this fantastic new structure, as if risen up from inconceivable depths; with one lone Tower breaking the waves and the tolling of immense bells heralding the return of an Atlantean cathedral wreathed in sea-fog.

In design the Tower was fantastically lofty, a dizzying physical projection capable of being conceived only in the mind of an individual given over wholly to dream. It radiated an aura of antiquity, and the surface of its brickwork was thick with the grey dust of untold centuries. The titanic spire that formed its pinnacle was bewildering to the imagination, for its height surpassed any of the skyscrapers of the “triumphant” modern era. It was as if the Tower was the spectre of a structure that had been destroyed, but which had forced its way back into existence, or back into human consciousness, which—nevertheless—amounts to the same thing.

The appearance, overnight, of a structural invader amidst the architectural vista to which one has become accustomed, seen from one’s own window, provokes terror.

Doubtless some puerile Freudian analyst would have had the temerity to designate the appearance of the Tower as evidence of a phallic symbol erupting into my consciousness from the depths of repression, but, in opposition to such a notion, one that cannot be disproved since its basis is ideological, I can do little more save express my scorn and contempt. The anthropodeist perspective is so ingrained into modern man that to the absolutely convinced any attempt at denial contains the seeds of its own defeat. Unable to acquiesce, I felt to protest the thesis was to confirm it.

By the time I had rapidly dressed and was ready to venture out into the mist, it had lifted and when next I looked out of the window, the Tower had vanished utterly.

I cursed myself for a fool and a victim of my own imaginings, for I have always been a dreamer, and such a one is often prone to delusion.

I could not help but conclude that the Tower could be seen only when the mist was present, and was not merely the by-product of my own mind having become disordered. This I realised over the course of many weeks observation, seeking in vain for the elusive structure. It was not a phantom edifice conjured by a mental fugue. Its first appearance occurred moments

after I had awoken for the day, had lit a cigarette and sat absently-mindedly in my easy chair looking out the window, with a completely clear frame of reference. Since my rooms (which I had occupied for just over a month) are on the third floor a quarter of the way up the steep rise of this district's hill, the view is extensive and I can see over huddled rooftops all the way to the summit.

If only it were not the case that the noise of tolling bells in the Tower had been so ghostly, more like the shadow of a sound than a sound itself, then I could have hoped others might notice, but it could be heard only late at night, at those moments when the world is at its quietest, when conversations die, when broadcasts and recordings are turned off, when dreams replace thoughts. And then there was the anti-light therein, not darkness, but of a negative intensity that, though glimpsed only through the Tower's narrow, gaunt apertures, formed streaming shafts of an unknown colour, and penetrated the gloom of the mist that lay without like mystical searchlights.

Though I tried not to allow this vision to dominate my day-to-day life, I could not resist its allure. Only when a mist descended was the Tower visible. I became a devotee of its capricious nature and longed, like a spurned lover, to further what opportunities were available for me to glimpse again the half-ruined edifice from which strange, distant chants seemed eventually to mingle with the tolling bells and whose warped architecture told a tale of madness beyond the apprehension of those who went about their commonplace lives.

I alone knew that some ultimate mystery was to be found within, and only inside the immense confines of the apparition would I discover the symbol for which the Tower stood. I was prepared always for the advent of mist, whether in the early morning or during the midnight hours, and went abroad in pursuit of the titanic structure, wandering the streets in a desperate attempt to get closer and closer. Yet, despite my best endeavours, I found it impossible to draw near, for the Tower seemed to maintain a fixed distance, one unrelated to my own conceptions of proximity.

It was, of course, not a physical, but rather a *spiritual*, phenomenon. The matter of my approach depended less on my physical route and the speed with which I acted, than upon my own state of mind. The Tower was not a structure visible to all, for it appeared only to those who had been initiated into its mysteries. I dared not speak of it to anyone else, lest the

spell be broken by my own faithlessness, and the mystery be snatched away from me.

I wondered then whether the fog, too, existed in my own mind, and formed as much a part of the initiatory sequence as any other component of the process of transformation.

True, I had been drinking a great deal. True also, that the small capital upon which I had been drawing in order to keep me from ruin, was close to exhaustion. My attempts to connect with the so-called “real world” had been unsuccessful. My rent was several weeks in arrears. What food I could afford to purchase was of the cheapest and least nutritious kind: instant noodles, bread on the last day of its expiry date, vegetables close to mouldering, and the contents of tins with peeling labels that, for the most part, lay dusty on shelves; the type viewed only as insurance by the majority of people against some long period of unexpected war or other disaster.

What few job interviews I obtained were useless, for when I was questioned upon business aptitude and commercial considerations, my answers were of a kind that revealed at once the gulf between an autocratic dreamer and a man of this world, sharing in its values. I did not tell anyone directly of the Tower, but dropped hints that I hoped might prove to be the equivalent of a password, or a secret sign, admitting me into that otherworldly realm where I hoped to find at least one other individual who knew of its cryptic existence and who was prepared to acknowledge its awful, and infinitely essential, character.

But always I encountered only those with television eyes whose own imaginative vision had dimmed, those whose values were formed by the irresistible tsunami of gossip and infotainment. Those whose gazes were fixed on bright plasma and LED screens, those addicted to shows where the value of a person was determined by his ability to entertain, to financially enrich or to sexually arouse, an agenda driven in turn by those who were drained of their own thought-processes by the media’s mental vampires. Pity those who, through the process of electronic devolution, had allowed themselves to be turned into a pack of obedient dogs, eagerly lapping up the anti-individualistic, collectivist poison provided by their supremely powerful masters, lapping up the noxious gruel, the sewage diet of self-destruction, and being told that this wave of conformist propaganda is freedom. Pity those who thought they had the solution, and who paid lip-

service to an alternate system of totalitarianism, which they called freedom, but in which the mass of men were only components; oppressed economic units rather than individuals.

For a time I wallowed in the icy consolations of pessimism, that anti-gospel which provides solace in the creed that the universe is so ordered as to be inimical to humanity itself. Relieved from the onus of developing a measure of stoic acceptance of life's vicissitudes, I found respite in a grand conspiracy theory in which the cosmos was intrinsically malignant to men. Intrinsically, but not *consciously*, malignant, you will note; rather like a natural poison-zone, in which sentience was an aberration of such jarring uniqueness that it could be nothing other than doomed to final destruction when confronted with the revelation of an ultimate, dead, and bleak reality.

And yet this scheme, like all the others, I found unsatisfying. It answered all questions, allayed all doubts, *provided* one acquiesced in its inhuman principles, and so I concluded it was a hoax. For if the advocates of pessimism were correct, they would surely have destroyed themselves, negating all that their continued existence represented. Instead, they lingered on within life, filling time in the fruitless quest to persuade others, the bulk of mankind, that all men are nothing more than mindless puppets, and, thereby, themselves playing at being the *puppet-master*.

Their excuses were hollow—especially when they retorted that their deaths would cause unwarranted distress to those they left behind—for why should they care at all for the temporary and negligible reactions of others whom, their logic dictated, were as doomed and ensnared by human illusions as were they? Suicide, instead of causing pain (though doubtless they would) should have been viewed, by the true pessimist, as being an *authentic act*, an *example to follow*, not as an occasion for mourning.

A pessimist is a liar, unless he destroys himself, and no less of a hypocrite than a priest who defiles the holy.

For, in truth, is not all human philosophy simply the piling up of one word after another in a self-absorbed train of thought and justification? To pull the strings of mental association, to prompt the idea, to suggest the conclusion, to lead, to guide, to steal back into the shadows and work one's "magic" from afar?

What then, of *experience* as opposed to *reason*? Can the experience of any one man be of significance to all others? And if experience be incommunicable, what then of a *better example* one man might set? Alas,

even had I endeavoured to turn myself into a saint, such a course was beyond my powers. Fallen too far into the morass of materialism, my soul had begun to rot, my imagination had dried up, and I had reached the stage of dreading any contact with my fellow human beings.

I emphasise it now; I had little-to-nothing in common with other people. Their values I did not comprehend, their ideals were to me a living horror. Call it ostentatious but I even sought to provide tangible proof of my withdrawal from the world. I posted a sign in the entrance to the building wherein I dwelt; a sign that indicated I had no wish to be disturbed by anyone, for any purpose whatsoever.

As these convictions took hold of me and, as I denied, nay even *repudiated*, the hold that the current society of men possesses over its ranks, as I retreated into a hermitage of the imagination, disentangling my own concerns from those paramount to the age in which I happened to be born, an age with no claim to be more enlightened, significant or progressive than any other, I tried to make a stand for the spirit. Tyranny, in this land, I was told, was dead. But I contend that the replacement of one form of tyranny with another is still tyranny. The secret police now operate not via the use of brute force in dark underground cells; they operate instead by a process of open brainwashing that is impossible to avoid altogether. The torture cells are not secret; they are everywhere, and so ubiquitous that they are no longer seen for what they are.

One may abandon television; one may abandon all forms of broadcast media, even the internet, but the advertising hoardings in every street, on vehicles, inside transport centres, are still there. And they contain the same messages.

Only the very rich can avoid their clutches utterly. Those who have obtained sufficient wealth may choose their own surroundings, free from the propaganda of a decayed futurity. And yet, and yet, in order to obtain such a position of freedom it is first necessary to have served the ideals of the tyranny slavishly, thereby validating it.

Still, even if one is not rich, there is freedom in the imagination. I recall, in particular, a certain night on the dreary stretch of the busy Archway Road. The rain was falling quite heavily, and beneath the stellar streetlamps the droplets beat down like a majestic mystery upon the sodden and wet pavements, creating a world of splendour and of intense fascination. Reality was transformed; a deeper glimpse into the realm of

possibilities was made apparent, one that suggested much more than a single moment, but which revealed itself as a shard from a greater eternity.

When I realised this, I began to see the vision of the Tower outside of those times when the mist seemed to bring it into existence, for it appeared my imagination had sufficient power to carry me more frequently into that other realm of spirit. And with each mental voyage, the next became less arduous.

Eventually, the Tower appeared omnipresent. I saw it, whenever I looked for it, at all hours of the day and night. Believing its appearance as a constant to be an indication of the mysterious structure that was now gaining a firmer foothold in reality—or what I took to be reality, or even some new reality imposed by my imagination—I naturally attempted to gain entrance to its immediate grounds, and perhaps even to its interior confines.

But when I tramped the maze of streets that I thought would draw me closer to the Tower, I found that, despite the ease with which I conjured it into being, still I got no nearer to my destination, and it remained as distant as when I first glimpsed it. Several times I made the attempt, but each one ended in exhaustion, and with a resultant bodily collapse dozens of miles from my home. Naturally, when asked about the object of my quest I dared not tell the truth lest I was regarded as being of completely unsound mind, and thereby unable to care for myself; a prospective candidate for the close attention and palliative care of the state (that is, of a society whose, albeit, unconscious, aim is to crush any form of deviation from its own standards).

What was contained inside the Tower? Was it not the case that it was less important in and of itself than the secret within? Increasingly, I thought so.

Physical distance was not the barrier to the attainment of close proximity; rather was it a question of spiritual distance.

I felt myself to be subject to a form of discipline, a form almost totally alien to that of the world in which I felt myself stranded, and something beyond even the increased power of my imagination. And this discipline was being imposed from without; from a force that was entirely transcendent of the self-absorbed and self-consuming world in which I dwelt. Without the discipline one could not advance. Moreover one did not seek the discipline, rather was one called to it by its source. But I knew

nothing of the nature of that source or of its meaning (if it was possessed of either).

The discipline required was precisely that form of introspection into which I had fallen, or to which I had succumbed. It was an ordered withdrawal from all the demands of the everyday. Not, I must add, *as an escape*. The process, I suppose, was most closely akin to meditation; an immersion into the essence of one's very consciousness, and the Tower stood as a signpost, one not representing some external object but the nucleus of my own mind, and not the nebulous dreams that surrounded it.

One may escape from the prisons of experience, ideology or philosophy, but it is impossible to escape from the reality of one's innermost self. Understanding this, I had freed myself from nostalgia, and having done so, what remained was to free myself from the prospect of the future.

Although the discipline was imposed from outside, I knew that my withdrawal was not ordered by any force other than my own self, in its own intrinsic desire to find its true purpose—the absorption into a greater meaning, one that I might finally attain by entry into the Tower.

When one has given up all the petty jealousies of ambition, all the siren-calls of satiety, when one instead recognises that the loss of all one holds dear in this materialistic paradigm is not an escape but a liberation, a moving on, a step into the next stage of being, that this is the only form of authentic revelation that there is, then one approaches true freedom.

Within the Tower was the mystery of untold ages, and without there was only certainty. For every man there exists an individual Tower, but all the Towers are One.

And I know now, gazing upon the reflection that stares back at me from the mirror in the apartment wherein I dwell, that to see the Tower is to pass from this world to the next. My body is that of a white-haired ancient, one whose flesh is honeycombed with innumerable lypomas, one whose skeletal structure has become strangely distorted, one whose face is a maze of criss-crossed lines harbouring rheumy, cataract-clouded blue eyes, one whose yellow skin, dry as parchment, is stretched tightly over a deaths-head skull.

Time becomes fluid and non-linear as the liberty of disintegration takes hold. Time torments those who immerse themselves in its infinite

progressions and regressions. Time, *experienced in its entirety*, is incomprehensible.

And indeed, since my discovery of the Tower, decades have passed in days and seconds have become aeons.

Across the whitewashed walls inside this overground tomb, there are scrawled indecipherable words and equations, each either haunted with antiquity or else pregnant with futurity.

Their meaning is lost, but their significance is not.

Publishing History

All stories in this collection were first published in *The Man Who Collected Machen and Other Stories*, Ex Occidente, 2009, with the exception of:

‘Glickman the Bibliophile’ first published in slightly different form as ‘Quayle the Bibliophile’ in *Terror Tales* #1, ed. John B. Ford, Rainfall Books, 2003.

‘The Age of Decayed Futurity’ first published in *Cinnabar's Gnosis*, ed. Dan Ghetu, Ex Occidente Books, 2009.

‘Thyxxolqu’ first published in *Shades of Darkness*, ed. Barbara & Christopher Roden, Ash-Tree Press, 2008.

‘The Tower’ is previously unpublished.

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